

*Addressing Regional Disparities – Inclusive and Culturally Attuned  
Development for the Himalayas  
Backgrounder for a multi-stakeholder consultative workshop*

*By Sejuti Basu, Research & Advocacy Team, Pragya*

Development in all the nations has been taking place as a gradual linear process or in some cases leaps and bounds. All the regions of the world are neither blessed with equal resource base nor do they reflect the similar physical/historical settings, and have not enjoyed the similar development attention. Hence, there is a development gulf in various part of the world. This is exemplified by the North-South Divide denoting the socio-economic divergence between the developed countries, known collectively as ‘the rich North’, and the developing countries or ‘the poorer South’, a divide not primarily defined by geographical locations. Disparity, however, also exists even at a regional, or for that matter micro level within a nation. Such inequity coupled with weak institutions could give rise to serious disorders in the society, e.g. crime and violence, political instability, and conflict.

Most developing countries have considerable regional variation within them in terms of average household income, poverty level, and access to health and educational facilities. National human development indicators can however, be misleading where large regional disparities exist. Hence, it is important to investigate the extent and determinants of regional disparities in representative regions. The development-divide between urban/developed areas and rural/pristine areas occurs frequently as the latter do not receive the leading edge technologies and focussed result orientation as the former. Use of various socio-economic indicators such as poverty incidence and depth, income inequality, HDI, and gender indicators helps in quantification and provides a better understanding of why some regions lag behind in the development process.

The World Bank and various other international organisations categorize India as one of the fastest growing economies of the world. Since early '80s, along with fast economic growth and diminishing poverty levels, India has experienced accelerated improvement in various indicators of human development, with major advancements in health and educational sectors, economic diversification. However, opinions differ about the distributional impacts of the benefits. In spite of considerable decline in poverty, poverty levels vary significantly across the states in this vast country.

India with a meagre 2.4% of the world surface area, sustains 16.7% of the world population, more than a billion people in 29 states and 6 union territories. There are significant variations across the states and the union territories in terms of topography, culture, and economic conditions. While some states have experienced rapid economic growth in the last few years, others have remained in the shadow zone of development. A closer examination of the backward regions in each state reveals some specific reasons for their backwardness. For example, backwardness can be attributed to scarcity of water due to low precipitation and lack of other perennial sources in Vidharba and Marathwada in Maharashtra, Rayalaseema and Telangana in Andhra Pradesh and Northern Karnataka.

Backwardness of certain stretches in Gujarat, Madhya Pradesh, Bihar and Orissa can be associated with the neglect of tribal inhabited regions by the ruling elites. Topography also acts as a major constraint the development of a region; the High Altitude Himalayas, the desert region of Rajasthan, are examples of such cases.

### *Understanding Regional Disparities – special focus on the high altitudes*

Why do spatial disparities exist? Most often, spatial inequalities in developing countries occur due to the natural advantages of some regions compared to the rest and presence of various agglomerating forces. From an economic geographer's point of view, physiographic settings influence development prospects of a region. The 'First Nature' geography indicates that some regions are favoured by virtue of natural endowments or proximity to rivers, coasts, ports and other strategic locations. However, physical geography alone, cannot dictate the destiny of a region. The 'Second Nature' geographical factors that act as economic agglomeration forces (efficiency gains from proximity, e.g. access to consumer market, etc) also play an important role in giving rise to income disparities. As spatial inequalities unfold, there is a tendency for such inequalities to increase and then decrease.

Despite the richness of mountains, the people who live here face a 'vertical gradient of poverty' that puts 80% of them below the poverty line<sup>6</sup>. They find themselves caught in remote stretches at the fringes of the states with weak infrastructure and limited access to communication facilities. They do not have a fair share of political and social representation and thus are not enabled with power to influence the policy decisions controlling their livelihood options. The inadequate opportunities, discrimination against ethnic groups, in short the overall physical and social marginalization, has kept the voices of all the mountain people from being heard.

The isolation resulting from steep gradients and the topographical variations have contributed to the rich biological and cultural heritage of the mountain regions and preserved them for ages. Mountains are rich in resources including valuable intangible assets. They are key areas of global biodiversity, as a result of the different topographical, climatic and soil conditions, sometimes over very short distances or elevation. They are often referred to as the 'islands of biodiversity' amidst 'oceans' of lowlands that have undergone transformation for centuries under anthropogenic activities. Over 50% of the world's protected areas, including 40% biosphere reserves belong to the mountains.

Mountain regions are also home to many diverse cultural and ethnic groups. Their isolation and self-sufficiency have given these groups strong cultural identities, along with a rich combination of ethnicities, religions and languages where people from other areas have settled in these high altitude habitations along the trading routes across precarious passes; for example along the Silk Route of Asia that passes through the Himalayas chain.

### *Living on the Edge – the Great Divergence*

Although the storehouse of much of the world's resources and diversity, mountain regions are grossly undervalued and under increasing threat of losing their rich heritage. The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change has indicated that the pattern of global warming will be more pronounced at high altitude zones, especially those in the tropics and sub-tropics - up to 3 to 5 times faster global warming than in other areas. Escalating anthropogenic and

environmental pressures are causing grave damage to these sensitive & fragile mountain worlds and the indigenous peoples and a wide variety of flora & fauna on their valleys and slopes. About half of the 700 million mountain people are at risk of malnutrition and food insecurity<sup>8</sup>. Deforestation is laying vast stretches barren, several rare and endemic species are threatened with extinction, and droughts & floods are recurrent threats.

Mountain regions have historically been deprived of development attention as the mountain communities continue to be among the poorest in the world, the remote valleys they inhabit the least developed in terms of basic infrastructure & facilities. A significant proportion of the countries ranked at the bottom as per the Human Development Index, are the landlocked and/or mountainous countries such as Nepal, Bhutan, Yemen, Rwanda, Burundi, Ethiopia and Eritrea. An estimated 80% of the world's mountain populations live below the poverty line. Despite the richness of mountain resources, as per Jane Pratt, former director of The Mountain Institute, most countries have a 'vertical gradient to poverty'. Also, the unique cultures of mountain lands, the source of support for these communities, are threatened by the winds of change and impacts of modernization.

- *Mountain ranges cover 24% of the earth surface.*
- *1 in every 10 people live in mountains.*
- *Almost 80% of the mountain population is below poverty line.*
- *Mountains are 'Water Towers' - All major rivers rise in mountains. In humid tropics, mountains provide 30-60% and in semi-arid and arid environments, 70-95% of fresh water downstream.*
- *Of the 20 species that are source of 80% of the world's food crop, 6 originated in the mountains.*
- *Mountain forests stretch over 9 million km<sup>2</sup> representing 28% of world's closed forest area.*
- *Mountain cloud forests are disappearing faster than rainforests – at 1.1% per year.*
- *11 out of 18 regions identified by UN that need humanitarian assistance (2002) are mountainous.*

### *Development Neglect in the Himalayas*

While the Himalayas are undoubtedly a canvas on which nature and culture have splashed their hues in abundance and with the boldest of strokes, the region is among the most disadvantaged and challenged. As the external world changes, in climate, technology, values, practices, the positive impacts of development have missed the Himalayan people, leaving stark gaps between these areas and the plains. On the other hand, the negative effects of development, such as degradation and depletion of natural resources, war and conflict, disease, have been magnified, in this vulnerable region and on its inhabitants.

The High Altitude Himalayas comprises small valleys with a scatter of villages and a dispersed population amidst high mountain ranges, insulated and dependent on local level resources. More than 80% of the population is tribal and among the most deprived in the world. These communities constitute a '*shadow population*' that suffers from extreme neglect by all agents of development and abysmally poor access to the basic services of education, health, communication. Himalayas has been recognized by Conservation International as one of the 34 Global Biodiversity Hotspots that are a priority for conservation action, having lost more than

70% of its original habitat. A bio-geographically unique zone, it has the maximum degree of endemism in the Asian region; unfortunately, many of these species of plants, birds and mammals, are critically endangered today, threatened by both anthropogenic impacts and climate change. The development neglect and inappropriate measures have left these marginalized communities under critical need for area specific development policies which should seek to address:

- depletion of biodiversity and unsustainable use of natural resources
- vulnerability to climate change and disasters
- lack of livelihood and technology options for mountain communities
- inadequate access to basic amenities & services
- erosion of ethnic cultures and marginalization of indigenous people

### *Climate change & the Himalayas*

Despite their remoteness and inaccessibility, the High Altitude Himalayas have suffered a high level of human & climate change induced biodiversity loss and habitat degradation. Apart from ecological damage, this has contributed to severe natural resource stress experienced by inhabitant communities, with associated issues of impoverishment as a result of impacts on natural resource based livelihoods. In the Himalayas, the rich forest biodiversity has suffered large-scale logging followed by plantations of fast-growing species at the expense of indigenous varieties and associated NTFPs whereas mixed forests of different species and ages are also more resilient to natural hazards than monoculture plantations. Misguided reforestation programmes have resulted in soil deterioration and decreasing water table. Climate change has also brought in an enormous new threat of increasingly frequent environmental disasters, among them being receding glaciers, recurrent droughts, flash floods, Glacial Lake Outburst Floods and the immense destruction caused by them to life and property.

### *Unique socio-ecological setting & incompatible development models*

Mountain areas are considered to be peripheral and less productive than others and accorded lower priority in national policies. The plight of these small populations gets overlooked in development plans, and policies based on the more dominant lowlands are applied in these regions, in spite of the differences in cultures & ecosystems, resulting in failure to achieve objectives. The High Altitude Himalayas need policies that recognize the unique socio-cultural and physiographic setting and the area specific requirements. More often than not, they are conceived, deliberated and implemented without any participation of the local people. In spite of their significant contribution in terms of life-giving resources used by humans, these regions have been accorded lower priority in terms of policy attention and lesser resources and funds for research and development. As a result of the relative isolation and remoteness of mountain regions, and the paucity of research on these areas, information available for use in casting policies is rather scanty. Mountain issues are not understood adequately and mountain specificities not recognized for the value they can bring to development of mountain regions. Due to their remoteness and inaccessibility, creation of infrastructure and service delivery becomes difficult and a high cost affair. The traditional models for development, infrastructure creation and service delivery fail in these regions with their difficult terrain and sparse population. The lower population also deprived the region of the research and technology attention that could help adapt systems to their unique socio-ecological conditions. Physical isolation, huge distances from the developed regional hubs and related conditions of inaccessibility severely limit the access to welfare services region.

### *Geopolitical status*

The peripherality of the Himalayan region and their strategic positions in terms of the neighbouring countries, make the area an extremely sensitive zone in terms of regional/international politics. The region has to contend with geopolitical issues. Its strategic location straddling the border of multiple, now-friendly, now-warring nations, leaves it frequently disturbed and in the 'eye of the storm' as it were. It is the recipient of attention for primarily reasons of conflict, extraction of resources, establishment of military might, etc., and inadequately for development of the region and its inhabitants. The Himalayan region is under constant military scrutiny, and experience frequent border skirmishes and periodic outbreaks of conflicts and war. Further, development meets several hurdles in these regions. Every new project needs to be scrutinized in the light of national security, thus significantly narrowing the scope of growth/development. Hence, all the interventions and policy recommendations have to keep in mind these unique socio-political issues of the area along with the major physical challenges for service delivery.

### *Technology barriers*

Mountain areas suffer a severe disadvantage as most technologies and delivery systems are designed with populous plains in mind. The technology development process completely excludes mountain areas and communities and socio-ecologically inappropriate technologies are introduced in these areas. The sparse population, the steep gradients, the cultural preferences, the climatic severities, are factors that differentiate mountain areas from the plains and make the application of plains-based technologies and methods in the Himalayas, set to fail. Energy production (hydro-power) fails and its distribution collapses, especially during winters. Water harvesting and distribution faces immense hurdles from the climate and steep gradients. This has left several Himalayan villages effectively without electricity and resource stress is experienced with respect to water for irrigation and drinking. The region is extremely remote with poor connectivity, villages are dispersed widely, and several communities are migratory: factors that make service provision of education, health, etc., difficult and inadequate. The severe winter weather leads to a breakdown of all facilities and services—roads, communication, electricity, education and health – since these are not adapted to the low temperatures and snowbound conditions. The communities therefore are deprived of the benefits of technology in their lives, such as of renewable energy and for communication, irrigation and value addition to local produce. People continue to be dependant on traditional means and antiquated methods that are frequently resource inefficient as well, leading to improper use of land, forest and water resources of the Himalayas.

### *Political & cultural marginalization*

The high mountain communities, both women and men in the Himalayas, often find themselves politically marginalised, excluded from the centres of politics, power and decision-making. The remote, sparsely populated settlements, regions with population density as low as 2 persons/sq.km, reduces their visibility in mainstream politics. Years of exclusion and deprivation and continuing marginalisation in the democratic processes of the nation, have also left the Himalayan tribes way behind on all human development indices and poorly equipped to access their rights and protect their ethnic identities. Given the education & information gaps, local democratic civil institutions too fail to get

properly established and to advocate for alternative models/policies. Secluded in their small valleys, the indigenous communities of the Himalayan region have evolved with unique cultures and distinct identities. The high mountain ranges result in physical isolation of the communities that inhabit this region and restrict movement and communication, factors that have led to the maintenance of the cultural sovereignty of the Himalayan people. With the strong homogenising influence of urban and mainstream cultures however, these are increasingly under threat; their traditional knowledge is being eroded fast and use of the traditional language, local crafts and music & dance forms is diminishing at an alarming rate. Development and the burgeoning tourism is changing values and behaviours, and younger generations in particular, are forsaking their traditional culture to adopt mainstream cultures that they perceive to have significant economic and social benefits. Mountain regions had developed a rich base of indigenous traditional knowledge that is being rapidly eroded under the forces of modernisation, as new methods/sciences make inroads and local value and promotion of ITK declines. The spread of many cultural forms (language, arts & crafts) to new generations has not continued, and they have also not evolved to modern lifestyles & needs, hence leading to declining use and endangerment of traditional cultural forms.

#### *Marginalisation of women*

Mountain women are excessively overworked, fetching drinking water from distant water sources, collecting fuel & fodder from the jungles, tending to cattle, working as agricultural & road labour at extremely low wages, attending to household chores – they work almost twice as much as the men on activities that require more time and energy, but are not rewarded financially. The burden on women is so much that they invariably tend to need the help and support of their children with the result that the girl children are forced to drop out of school and assist their mothers. In fact, the mountain girl children work almost as much as their mothers. The hardship of the mountain women's daily lives is also reflected in their ill health and untimely deaths most often caused by poor nutrition, lack of access to medical care and prolonged exposure to indoor air pollution from wood-based cooking, with the result that Himalayan villages are characterised by high sex ratio imbalances. The level of literacy is, perhaps, the most vital indicator of development of a society. Literacy among women here is woefully low and the gender-gap in education in the Himalayan region is much higher than in the plains. In certain pockets there are significant gender gap in literacy in the Himalayas, for example in districts of Uttarkashi (Uttarakhand), Chamba (Himachal Pradesh), Tawang (Arunachal Pradesh). Their lack of literacy, vocational skills and exposure, constrains the ability of these High Altitude Himalayan women to help themselves. The norm of women's inclusion in grassroots political institutions does exist, but women are rarely more than names and thumb impressions on govt. forms, the actual control lying with the males.

#### *Poverty*

People of high-altitude Himalayas suffer multiple forms of poverty, exacerbated by environmental vulnerability. Apart from the most recognised World Bank form, that of low incomes, they also suffer from resource stress, livelihood insecurity, and exclusion from the mainstream economy, among others. There are very few urban centres and the vast majority of the population lives directly off the land, either as subsistence or as cash-crop farmers. The remoteness and poverty of the region and sparseness of its settlement have hindered the development of secondary and tertiary employment sectors in the

area. Economic stagnation & poverty is severe, with a significant percentage of the population lying below poverty line and high levels of underemployment as well. Small & micro enterprises in the non-agriculture sector are a potential route out of poverty, but the technical skill-base required for such enterprises is lacking.

### *The Way Ahead – Regional Policies for balanced Regional Growth*

Mountain regions in general and the Himalayan region in particular, have tended to remain on the periphery of policy-space. In larger deliberations on various issues at the international and country levels, its uniqueness and variance from the mainstream, results in the Himalayan region being excluded, except in rare cases. A cause of concern is the frequently occurring regional tensions, which often lead to popular agitation in the area and at times militant activities, due to such regional disparities in economic and social development. For example, creation of some of the new states in the past (e.g. Uttarakhand) was through the wake of popular agitation based on apparent neglect of backward regions in the larger States.

#### *Bridging Disparity*

Reduction of regional disparities should be viewed as a national objective. India's HDI depends on the incomes and socio-demographic indicators of development in every part of India. Resources are not the real constraint. It is the way resources are spent. Regional disparities are bound to take place in a country as large as India and as diverse as it is, in every sector and dimension of life. It is the responsibility of every citizen then, to help their fellow Indian to step out of backwardness and enjoy the opportunities the world has to offer. There are specific institutional arrangements for development of backward regions in a few states. Maharashtra has separate regional plans for the backward areas. Uttar Pradesh had a separate regional plan for the hill region, which went on to become the state of Uttarakhand. Jammu & Kashmir, West Bengal have autonomous hill development councils for Leh and Kargi and Darjeeling respectively for addressing their region specific needs.

*'Those sharing in the benefits of mountain resources (should also) share in the responsibility for their sustainability.'*  
- FAO

#### *Socio-ecologically adaptive solution for endogenous development*

Mountain peoples have always traveled; their routes were often long and arduous, as they carried goods from some of the remotest places in the world across some of its most difficult terrain. But in recent decades, the scale and extent of road building has brought huge changes to the mountains. Roads have reduced the distances between mountains and the lowlands but also brought with them the many advantages of being connected to others more swiftly and simply, but also imported all the challenges and pressures that this implies. In this sense, the road serves as a metaphor for the changes facing many mountain societies today. Development interventions designed for the Himalayas need to incorporate local inputs and appropriately reflect the special characteristics of the people they serve, allowing for local modifications within broad, macro designs to serve these 'Last Mile Population' and build their capacity for endogenous holistic development. The Himalayan region is unique. State-delivered development programmes designed to address the far more populous plains are often rendered incompatible with the Himalayan region and fails to achieve their purpose. At present, the diversity of the High Himalayan societies and ecosystems fails to find a reflection in plurality of policies and programmes. The policies devised for the region need to address its unique socio-ecological fabric in order to be relevant and fruitful.

### *Community Managed Mechanism of Delivery*

People of the Himalayas could respond better to the changing world and shape their own destiny in a more effective manner - if networked for solidarity and sharing, if collaborating for local level interventions and range- wide actions, if involved for designing policies and programmes that address their problems and unique conditions. Although the development of the backward regions is viewed as a national responsibility, any appropriate solution would also require active participation of the local leadership and community. Unless the local leadership—political, bureaucratic and intellectual, along with the community members resolve to usher in development based on sharing the gains on egalitarian basis with the masses, the task of the state officials become more difficult and results will be hard to come by. An understanding of local knowledge and practices is extremely important to identify what are important and can be adopted in the current Himalayan context. Building upon traditional knowledge and practices i.e. capitalising on local strengths is important to reduce dependence on external support<sup>9</sup>. Research and development in the High Altitude Himalayas also need to involve local people, as they are the real ‘experts’ of these regions. This will also ensure a blend of Traditional & Scientific Approach in terms of situational analysis and service delivery to suit the regional needs.