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Policy Priorities for Sustainable Mountain Development

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Policy Priorities for Sustainable Mountain Development

Edited by Golam Rasul and Madhav Karki. Kathmandu, Nepal: International Centre for Integrated Mountain Development (ICIMOD), 2008. Free download at http://books.icimod.org. Hardcopy: US$ 15.00 (developed countries), US$ 10.00 (developing countries), US$ 7.50 (ICIMOD member countries). ISBN 978-92-9115-098-5.

This book is a collection of papers given at a workshop organized by ICIMOD in Kathmandu in 2006, with the objective to "facilitate a common understanding and vision about mountain policy issues, options, and priorities." The 10 chapters address a range of topics related to the overarching question of how to combine mountain livelihoods and poverty alleviation with environmentally sound policies.

The first three chapters deal with the question of state versus community domination in the management of natural resources. J. Gabriel Campbell favors stronger community involvement, referring to success stories like Nepali forest user groups and ecotourism. Since policies are intermediated by institutions, indigenous "hidden" institutions should be allowed to play a vital role in shaping and implementing policies. Likewise, Mahesh Banskota points to shortcomings of previous state policies, although the environment might have fared even worse without such interference. In a highly intriguing chapter, N. C. Saxena, however, claims that "decentralization that actually works for the poor is more the exception than the rule." He contends that the reasons for modest achievements in forest policies must be sought outside the sector itself. Unclear property rights lead to an open access situation with a "tragedy of the commons" outcome whether the state or local communities are the formal owners. Furthermore, the present practice of implementing development programs to focus on households serves to undermine traditional ability of collective action, which is a prerequisite for viable community resource management. Saxena's solution to the present impasse is to strengthen the position of traditional institutions, like the panchayat in India, but he simultaneously claims that local institutions produce their own incomes in addition to matching funds from the government. Thus, becoming accountable to local people as well as to the forest department could reduce present malpractices of corruption and disempowerment of marginal groups.

In a chapter on regional cooperation on water management, Quamrul Islam Siddique echoes the so-called theory of Himalayan degradation, according to which upstream communities are blamed for downstream problems of extreme water discharge variability. Seen from the perspective of Bangladesh, technical solutions to problems of flooding and low flow are proposed through the construction of huge, multipurpose water reservoirs in Nepal. The same theory is also implied by Madhav Karki and Golam Rasul, who, like Saxena, identify fuzzy property rights as a major obstacle to sustainable development. Community-based management must be strengthened in order to transform subsistence economies into commercial activity, which is a prerequisite for progress. The weak market integration of mountain economies is also seen by Kamal Banskota and Narpat Jodha to be a major obstacle to development. Limited accessibility, fragility, marginality, and subsistence production are perceived to prevent the emergence of factors that have proved to be hallmarks of successful development elsewhere, like crop specialization, high productivity, market access, human capital, and the exploitation of comparative advantages.

Eklabya Sharma et al argue that maintenance of biological diversity is a side effect of people-centered resource management systems and point to the international cooperation in the Kangchenjunga Landscape Program as a case to learn from. Introduction of community-based management raises "second-generation problems" that call for continuous attention and a flexible approach.

In a well-documented chapter, Roger White and Sanjeev Bhuchar disagree with the theory of Himalayan degradation when they maintain that "farmers upstream cannot be blamed for floods downstream." Nevertheless, environments as well as livelihoods and the drudgery of women could be improved by small-scale projects like water harvesting, drip irrigation, fish farming, and leveling of cultivated terraces.

"Greater voice for all mountain people in the Himalayas" can be achieved through a rights-based approach, according to Michael Kollmair. "Right to information" legislation would be helpful in that respect, granting salience and concomitant increased accountability on the part of decision-makers on all levels.

Quite surprisingly, the last chapter is devoted to educational policies in Bangladesh. Thematically far removed from the focus of the book, one of its points could nevertheless have been made relevant. Md Abdul Aziz finds that 50 years elapsed between the appointments of education commissions during the British period, while commissions have been appointed every 5 years since independence. If the situation is parallel in natural resource management, it may be argued that a certain policy has had too little time to be properly implemented before it is replaced by a new one.

The book bears clear evidence of being a collection of papers. There are only a couple of cross-references in the book, and the same

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sociogeographic information is repeated several times in the introduction to the various chapters. The quality of the individual chapters is rather variable. Some are marred by a fashionable "development" terminology without any concise semantic content; others are overly concerned with the achievements and potentialities of ICIMOD, reminiscent of an institutional curriculum vitae. But, taken together, the book nicely brings the reader to the front of research and policy issues related to challenges facing Himalayan ecosystems and communities. Being an academic reader myself, I particularly appreciated Saxena's chapter for its sharp analyses and well-documented arguments and for locating forest management into a wider sociopolitical and comparative context. Development workers and policy-makers will also find great utility in the project experiences and concrete proposals for sustainable small-scale initiatives listed by White and Bhuchar.

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