

HIGH HIMALAYA FORUM

Issues & Priorities identified at the Second Annual Conclave

Climate change: Glacier retreat and other adverse effects of climate change constitute an issue of survival for Himalayan communities. The water level in Indus and Pangong rivers is falling, groundwater is affected and there is shortage of water for communities. In addition, climate change is expected to bring about intense rain and extreme floods as well as disturbances in river flows. Long-term planning on addressing climate change associated issues is a critical need. Communities need to be educated on global warming and adaptation and conservation actions facilitated. Policymakers need to be provided inputs that would help them design appropriate policies and programmes.

Infrastructure: Infrastructural inadequacies of the Himalayan region are major bottlenecks for its development and will require thorough assessment and feasibility studies for specific sites, followed by consideration education and lobbying and facilitation as may be required. Surface *road connectivity* within the region with road network extended till the last villages and year-round connectivity for the region with the rest of the country needs to be assured. Availability of adequate *electricity and fuel* is essential for improved quality of life and economic development of the region. In view of difficulties of conventional modes of generation and distribution of energy in the area, alternative sources of energy and a decentralized model for generation should be promoted. *Communication systems* need to be in place and networking should be enhanced. Alternative technologies/methods such as Community Radio, HAM radio, etc., could be developed for reaching remote locations and for raising awareness and assistance during critical times, such as natural calamities.

Cultural heritage: The cultural heritage of the Himalayas is under threat. The unique cultural heritage of the Himalayan is under pressure from changing value systems and development trends, and the indigenous traditional knowledge is fast eroding. Special attention needs to be focused on the preservation of important cultural heritage sites in the Himalayas. The traditional indigenous knowledge and heritage, such as ethnobotanic knowledge, folk music and arts of the region, need to be documented. Diffusion and promotional strategies need to be worked out and implemented at local and national levels.

Ecological concerns in development: Infrastructural development in the Himalayas is putting at risk its ecology. Road-building and hydro-electric projects, planned or in process, have given rise to several concerns with respect to their impacts on the Himalayan biodiversity and natural resource status. There is a critical and urgent need for a thorough assessment of and timely feedback on the impacts of all infrastructure development projects. Changes, if required, would also call for lobbying and advocacy actions.

Natural resource management: Management of the fragile ecology and natural resource status of the Himalayas is another immediate concern. *Land and water resources* are being degraded because of overuse and improper use. Awareness needs to be generated for the conservation and sustainable use of water resources, controls on ground water extraction facilitated, and interventions for rainwater and snow harvesting and infusion of improved irrigation technologies, need to be promoted. Measures for proper zoning and land use need to be devised and actively promoted at local levels, and afforestation and soil conservation programmes encouraged. The *biodiversity* of the Himalayas is under threat and several endemic species may be lost to the world forever. Threat assessment surveys must be carried out and species that are critically endangered taken up for conservation through state and community action.

Economic and niche sector development: The people of the Himalayas lack adequate economic opportunities and livelihood avenues, and the Himalayan economies need a focused impetus. However, economic infrastructure is weak, technology penetration is low, energy-dependent processes are difficult, and markets are distant. The Himalayan region is however rich in natural and cultural resources that are eminently suitable for niche industries, and policies and programmes need to be devised to develop these. Development actors need to be facilitated to undertake entrepreneurship and cluster development actions in the Himalayan region.

Welfare issues: Education, healthcare and water & sanitation facilities have not reached the remote villages in the Himalayas in adequate measure, and there are considerable quality shortfalls in the services as well. The status of these welfare services needs to be periodically assessed and feedback provided to the State. In addition,

education needs to be perceived as a key development tool, and as such be designed to incorporate local language and culture of the Himalayas, environmental education, and other relevant subjects.

Disaster management: The fragility and severe climatic conditions of the Himalayan region make it prone to natural hazards. Climate change has further aggravated this, enhancing occurrence of disasters. Disaster management is of urgent importance. This would require in-depth vulnerability assessment and identification of critical sites. Policies and programmes need to be designed to facilitate disaster risk mitigation. At the local level, programmes must be facilitated to ensure protection of vulnerable communities and timely and adequate relief.

Addressing special groups: Certain groups in the Himalayan region are even more neglected and marginalized and behind the others on various development indices- for instance, transhumant, migratory communities. Special initiatives should be designed, State and non-state, for accelerated development for such groups.

Special body for Mountain Development: The Himalayan region needs enhanced policy attention and development resources. The creation of a government body for Mountain Development, similar to the North Eastern Council, would facilitate fund allocation and facilitate appropriate development in the Himalayas. In addition, it could facilitate cooperation and knowledge exchange with neighbouring countries for development, resource management, and peace building.