

Symposium | Challenges facing agricultural communities in the Himalayas: Global causes and local implications for development

Report and Call for Action

The symposium, convened by the NGO Norlha | Helping People in the Himalayas, took place on 19 November 2014 in the premises of the FEDEVACO in Lausanne and consisted of 3 sessions, each covering a distinct theme, as follows. Each session had a facilitator and a panel. The public was invited to contribute from the floor, and did so liberally.

Challenges for agricultural communities in mountainous regions I: Climate change and water resources

Communities in the Himalayas face many challenges. Examples include migration, pollution, community conflict related to water resources, connectivity to market and ownership of seeds. Environment per se tends to take second place for them. Farmers adapt to new climatic conditions and implement diversification.

Black carbon¹ is a serious, practical issue, which has immediate potential for action, as it poses a serious health hazard. It is the result of soot emissions typically emitted from combustion of biofuel and fossil-fuel. Atmospheric research has shown that agricultural production has declined much more due to the black carbon than due to climate change. This implies that there are locally applicable solutions to climate change issues.

There is also a large atmospheric brown cloud (ABC), a layer of air pollution that recurrently covers parts of the Himalayas which poses an even larger threat than climate change; research still needs to be conducted on this, but this brown cloud is for the farmers a relatively distant problem.

Climate change has altered predictability for farmers. Besides temperature, there have been problems with water: there are periods of unexpected downpours followed by periods of drought. There must be compensation to the Himalayan farmers as they have no role in the

¹ Black carbon is formed through the incomplete combustion of fuel from fossil fuel, biomass burning and bio-fuel burning for cooking and heating purpose. Primary sources include emissions from diesel engines, cook stoves, wood burning and forest fires. When deposited on snow and ice, it absorbs sunlight, again generating heat, which warms both the air above and the snow and ice below, thus accelerating melting. For more details please refer to [Atmospheric Brown Cloud & Black Carbon](#), ICIMOD 2010

causes of climate change. At a macro level, there is little doubt that economic and industrial growth in India and China very likely have an adverse impact on the Himalaya; (if this is confirmed) these countries should provide some degree of compensation.

From an international perspective we observe the absence of legal instruments on behalf of mountain people, including Himalayan people, and an absence of “mountain-related governance”; such instruments exist at other regional levels e.g. the Alps Convention and the Carpathian Convention. Regional cooperation is called for as is the need to introduce legal instruments linking the Himalayan region to food security and agriculture.

For example some countries are pushing for better recognition of mountains-related issues e.g. in the MDGs and sustainable development dialogue issues^{2 3 4 5}. Within the UN system, Small Island States have an umbrella and are united, and land-locked countries also have formed an interest group; mountainous communities do not have such an umbrella, as countries with mountains do not have a special agenda for mountains at the global level⁶. Consequently it is difficult to bring mountain people together.

The recommendations from the recently published report named “*The Last Straw? The additional burden of climate change on food security in the Himalaya*” which can be found at: <http://www.grida.no/publications/last-straw> are very instructive; it highlights – among others – that policy makers need more information on food security and production systems; there is a need for support to greater diversity in small-scale farming; it is of great importance to strengthen education and build effective networks for knowledge sharing; and it is crucial to evaluate to what extent climate-smart tools are gender-sensitive.

Lowland areas need information and statistics from mountain regions since they are dependent on them, especially relative to water. Support to sustainable development upstream is vital them. UNEP has done a lot of research on these topics in Nepal, Peru and Africa.

Within the REDD⁷ mechanism, funds are available globally for forestation and/or CO2 sequestration; one issue here is that international organizations are giving money to governments; so one should work with communities to measure sequestrations and lobby for mechanisms that enable money to come through communities rather than through governments.

² Will International Pursuit of the Millennium Development Goals Alleviate Poverty in Mountains? in *Mountain Research and Development*

³ UNGA: [Report of the Secretary-General on Sustainable Mountain Development](#)

⁴ Mountlennium, University of Geneva: [Reaching Millennium Development Goals through Regional Mountain Governance](#)

⁵ FAO: [Post-2015 Development Agenda: Forests and Mountains](#)

⁶ Mountain countries mainly promote their own interest-based issues such as mountain tourism, etc.

⁷ REDD+: <http://www.un-redd.org/aboutredd/tabid/102614/default.aspx>

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Legal basis mentioned include the Convention on Biodiversity: www.cbd.int

Economics of mountain ecosystems in TEEB: The Economics of Ecosystems and Biodiversity (TEEB), www.teebweb.org

[Women at the frontline of climate change - Gender risks and hopes](#) – UNEP

Challenges for agricultural communities in mountainous regions II: Migration and gender

Migration in Himalayan communities changes roles and community decision-making processes. Women face different issues than men when migrating, including abuse and exploitation. Fieldwork conducted by CDE shows that in 70% of the households in the studied villages at least one member has migrated. They abandon their land and the cost of hiring labour is very high. It accordingly increases women's workload. Migrants of Himalayan communities migrate often to the Middle East where they tend to be ill-treated. However, to return to their mountainous communities of origin is also difficult as they have experienced a more comfortable lifestyle abroad while subsistence farming in their home communities is usually harsh and brings insufficient yields. Migration work in the Middle East can also be dangerous (every day a plane arrives in Nepal bringing on average seven bodies, migrants who died doing dangerous work).

Migration is a very strong force we cannot stop; rather we have to make it an opportunity. Outmigration increases women's workload; it impacts gender roles and the family decision-making process. Increased decision-making of women means empowerment, but only if they are ready for it.

Migration plays a significant economic role as 25% of GDP comes from remittances but there is no government program to help migrants in Nepal. Many of the remittances are spent in Kathmandu on the construction of houses. How to use these remittances in a more useful way? The issue of remittances (impact and how used) is not addressed for now by the international aid community. The focus should be placed on how migration can improve the country, rather on stopping migration.

Development organizations should focus on addressing these issues and favouring a development-oriented use of remittances, incl. through capacity building, otherwise many of the migrants won't go back to the mountains. Norlha and other NGOs working on this theme should share their knowledge with other organizations, analyse and invest in knowing what others are doing. Norlha can link with an organization like ICIMOD and create a local NGO in the Himalayan countries. Norlha could also focus on providing access to credit and financial instruments for returnees.

Another issue to address is the lack of access to financial instruments for migrants; loans are a huge burden for them, and there's a lack of transparent information and open dialogue in society that ideally should include agencies, workers and their families.

The causes of migration include unemployment; lack of cash; limited entrepreneurship possibilities and job opportunities to return to rural areas. Return migrants (who would actually prefer to stay in Nepal) should have similar opportunities.

A potential opportunity for women, related to the considerable *feminization of agriculture work*, is to realize that the production methods of the past cannot and should not be replicated. Training women, building their capacities, enabling them to better adapt, to create new ways of production, and new social functioning, (e.g. training them on the basic use of medicine/drugs), would be potential solutions to the challenges they face in their communities due to migration.

Another issue is the dignity of the farmers. Nepali youth see the farmer's job as dirty or backward. We should improve access to finance and to facilities. There do in fact exist young people who want to continue agriculture. The case is also made by indigenous people that their villages are not polluted, there is good food and that there are facilities such as schools, all of which can be used to attract youth to return. It would be good to work on contributing a new image for farmers (see reference below).

Also in the mountains women have to become leaders. Women see as their priority in rural areas health, education and access to facilities. A health priority is the creation of facilities for pregnant women. Men see as a priority roads to villages so they can work. In the Himalayan villages there is a lack of entrepreneurship and job opportunity.

Norlha could play a role in improving the access to credit, to financial instruments, especially for women, whose access to these is usually restricted.

What are the implications of these migration patterns in 50 years? If men don't go back to the village, remaining in the capital (or urban centres), what will be the consequences for remote areas? The ecological consequences of land management changes due to migration are more forests and more wildlife in abandoned areas, and soil erosion in drier areas, as terraces are not maintained anymore.

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See [Migration as an Adaptation Strategy and its Gendered Implications](#), Mountain Research and Development, Aug 2014: 255–265

More information about the international farmers' movement:

<http://viacampesina.org/en/index.php/52-audiovisual/video>; and one of their films about farmers and food security: <http://vimeo.com/27473286>

A scientific paper about the well-being of the left behind in eastern Nepal, where farming is seen as a dirty job: [Shifting perceptions of food security and land in the context of labour out-migration in rural Nepal](#) by Gartaula, Niehof & Visser in Food Sec. (2012) 4:181–194.

The status of female farmers in the world, in National Geographic:
<http://voices.nationalgeographic.com/2014/03/28/equality-for-women-and-sustainable-development-go-hand-in-hand/>

Future of development aid in agricultural communities in the Himalayas

The main strength of mountain communities is that they have a strong sense of values. To develop communities one needs health, education and enterprises.

It is worthwhile to revive AlpAction, as they were very successful in raising funds for various projects for example at WEF Davos. Nicola Furey from Earthfocus is the contact person for AlpAction.

The Aga Khan Foundation is one of the most innovative NGO in Asia thanks to its links with Ismaili people and the fact that its local branch pays for a part of each project. AKF has created universities for mountain development.

The role of Corporate Social Responsibility: CSR programs have tried for several years to have the corporate sector involved in mountains. These companies want to have added value, they are less interested in good projects. They look for local organizations. For example Nestle is involved in many water projects. What is the added-value of a small NGO? There is the potential to work with remittances, which is private money so you need a good strategy. Look at for example the Philippines and El Salvador.

The role of a small Swiss NGO could be, related to remittances, to work on incentive micro instruments. Second, bringing migrants back to mountains is impossible unless services such as access to credit and information technologies, access to products transformation, road access, water harvesting, help with marketing, etc. are present in these remote areas. E.g. in Nepal, there are interesting and valuable products e.g. medicinal herbs can be cultivated incl. for oil extraction and there's a high demand by large international companies.

There is also a need to organize the farmers, so that the value-added process is done locally, which provides labour for returned migrants. Here, putting actors together is one of the tasks for a small NGO.

Related to migration and the resulting feminization of agriculture, another aspect to consider is the diversification and adaptation of agriculture products. What are the possible value-added products incl. their branding and marketing?

Call for Action

The experiences and views expressed by the wide range of experts present at the symposium, highlight existing challenges, lessons learnt and potential solutions to key issues facing agricultural communities in the Himalayas.

Norlha consequently suggests action in the following areas, for the consideration of all organizations concerned with the peoples of the Himalayas:

1. **Providing migration with a sustainable-development dimension**, including the developmentally sound use of remittances; helping safe migrations; and access to financial instruments, especially for women.
2. **Restoring dignity to farmers, farming and the social image of peasantry**
3. **Recognising and supporting the crucial role of women in agricultural communities**, including conducting research on selected topics and making the information available; and training women in techniques that enable them to adapt to new ways of production and entrepreneurship
4. **Capacity development and institutional strengthening**; incl. learn from the process and share the lessons learnt from this with others
5. **Agricultural production support**; including promoting adequate technologies; diversification of agriculture; value-added products, branding and marketing
6. **Water management**, in relation to climate change adaptation issues, including water harvesting
7. **The promotion of legal instruments** that help protect mountain people, including those of the Himalayas, and to govern themselves appropriately.
8. **Bringing mountain people together** to review their shared challenges, learn from each other, and help each other.

Norlha stands ready to discuss any of the above with interested organizations and individuals. Please contact us at contacts@norlha.org or through our website at www.norlha.org