

## DECISION MAKING AND LOCAL GOVERNANCE IN THE HINDU KUSH HIMALAYAS

### CONCLUSION OF THE THREE SESSIONS

The method finally chosen to tackle the issue of the specificity of mountains in the decision making processes and local governance has been to start from what everybody agrees that all mountains do have in common (i.e. physical features, all at various scales in the various mountains), and to see how the populations living in them, namely, in the present case, the Himalayan societies, have build themselves from the specific local combinations of these features and from their own history and choices they have made, since none of these societies has been totally determined by its environment, for the very simple reason that many of them migrated to the mountains with already elaborate social structures.

#### **1.- A thread: culture.**

The participants to the conference had been asked to explain the ways their communities take decisions by the way of concrete examples. As can be seen in details in the conclusions of the three sessions, exposed hereafter, the representatives of the mountain populations present at Yuksam do feel that, as a whole, their socio-economic conditions have worsened in the recent past, not only as compared with those of the plains but also in absolute terms. Some of the reasons are specific to mountains, some are not. Also, all the sections of their societies have not been affected in the same manner and to the same extent, and local disparities have therefore also increased.

For those reasons, the majority of the cases exposed were examples of technical or managerial innovations introduced to reverse this trend. Thus, while discussing the issue of local governance, the representatives were also asking themselves: What is development? The answer was not specifically expressed but, following what was said, development could be considered to have to be the processes allowing a society not only to keep but also to enhance its possibility and capacity, i.e., in one word, its liberty of choices.

The next question, immediately linked to this first one was: what is society and, thus, culture, then, if some members of a community, namely, but not only, women, do not feel to be recognised, even feel to be oppressed by the actual social structures?

The point of consensus was reached when culture in the Himalayas was defined as a highly and primarily spiritual relationship to nature, or environment, as it is termed nowadays, and, of course its resources and their management or production. It is not only that, but it was considered to be that above all, because it was a point of consensus for all the participants. This definition is all the more interesting if one considers that in Himalayan societies also, the social world very often mirror the spiritual, religious or philosophical world . But, then, the mountain communities, even if they have not been deprived of the management of their resources and territories, have generally at least been deprived of their own management structures. On the other hand, it is widely known that, in the majority of cases, the existing centrally imposed administrative structures such as panchayats or VDCs, but also other administrations, often fighting each other (such as revenue and forests), were not able to efficiently manage the resources at the local level. This has worsened the condition of the oppressed sections of the communities (namely women).

The common feature of all the presentations was that, trough the exercise of their sovereignty on some of their resources (forests, water, land, energy...), the populations, and namely the women, have been able to demonstrate to others, but also to themselves, their ability to perform tasks which had been hitherto forbidden to them in the name of a so-called natural inability; and to gain self-confidence. So, through the equitable and participatory management of resources, the empowerment of the weakest, which are often values coming from the outside world through the work of NGOs, the different sections of the community have rediscovered that they need each other ("we are wheels to the same cart"). During the conference, the position of women, the situations of inequity have then often been considered not as the bases of the culture and society, as men or privileged sections of the communities present them, but as a consequence of an evolution, and even contradictory to deeper cultural values. More, these societies become again inventive, as they feel they were in the past, and transform their own social structures, in the continuity of what they feel is their culture. Whenever required, they have also been able to create new structures adapted to new problems (demography,

rarity of space and resources, monetarisation of the economy), and based on the conception they have of their society and cultural values.

Still, it has to be underlined that the majority of the examples presented were not envisaging the territory and its resources as a whole and its management as a system, since the link with local comprehensive governance structures was missing. Thus, the empowerment of local communities over their own territories and resources is still halfway.

## **2.- Transmission of values and acquisition of knowledge**

Another common feature was that the representatives feel that they have also been deprived of the transmission of their values, knowledge and past to their children as the school is nowadays in charge of this task. To put it in few words, let us say that, in the past, elements of the “outside world” which were adopted by local communities, in a constant process, were integrated in their technical and/or value systems before being passed on to their children by themselves. Nowadays, these elements are taught by outsiders (the teachers) who most of the time have no idea of the local value or technical systems and present them as antagonistic to what they are supposed to teach to children. Thus, with text books meant for people of the plains, the increasing number of radios and even television sets, which generally present the outside world as a totality contradictory to local cultures and without possible links, continuity between yesterday and tomorrow is broken, and the local cultures are viewed as unable to adapt themselves, as they were constantly doing in the past, to the modern world and, thus, are doomed as such.

As a consequence, and however paradoxical this might seem, the mountain people feel more deprived of access to information than they had been in the past and wish to have real access to knowledge of any kind.

## **3.- The main conclusion**

of this conference is that the, more than anything else, local communities wish to be empowered to take decisions at their own level, whenever their own territories, resources and society are directly concerned. Their ambition is to have a say also in the education, communication and health systems, utterly irrelevant and disorganised in their local conditions, and they state that this power of decision is useless unless they are also empowered to manage the finances attached to these decisions.

Here-attached is a summary of the conclusions of the three sessions and of the presentation of the Himalayas to be communicated at the Quito Conference. These documents have been elaborated during the conference and have been discussed and finalised during the last day. In that respect they are the result of a collective work of all the participants to the conference, as well as what has just been said.

Another output of the conference is the decision to create national and regional Himalayan branches of WMPA, in order to continue the work of exchanging knowledge, problems and solutions, and also to be able to communicate and establish strong links, through other WMPA regional branches, with the populations of the other mountain areas of the world. This should allow the emergence of the consciousness of the specificity of mountains as such, which should be taken into account in the actual context of globalisation.

## COMMON CONCLUSIONS OF THE TWO FIRST SESSIONS OF THE YUKSAM CONFERENCE (MID-HILLS AND HIGH MOUNTAIN FOREST COVER)

In the Himalayas,

### ◇ **Remoteness and distance are causes of**

✓ **Multiplicity of micro-cultures**

✓ **People ignoring their rights (as a whole, but also, inside this whole, women and )**

✓ **having no access to proper services:**

> education and schooling

> precise information,

> training,

> know how,

> knowledge of the value of their own products or resources: they sell at low prices valuable items and are in the hand of the wholesalers.

> Information of the possible technical solutions to their problems

> due attention to specific local health problems (HIV, tuberculosis, malaria...)

> energy

> finances

Thus the burden of heavy investments and maintenance costs is imposed on them. At the same time, the necessity to get organised by themselves and to have to initiate and do things themselves, the realisation that they can do it make them proud. The first impulse to deprecate ones own culture and to adopt irrelevant development models is overcome.

✓ **Remoteness is also responsible for the lack of marketing facilities and the increase of the prices of goods already more expensive than plain products.**

✓ **the prices of inputs is higher**

✓ **Thus, the local products have to be specific to the mountains, they cannot compete with the products of the plains. To introduce specific products is necessary (counter-season crops or vegetables, cheese, tourism, paper, medicinal herbs...).**

✓ **people have been left out of the development processes of the plains**

✓ **Thus, the disparities between plains and mountains have increased. At the same time, since mountain people migrate and do see this development, they have become conscious of their marginalisation.**

✓ **The fragility of their resources and territories makes them conscious of the fragility of their culture.**

✓ **In the mountains, resources, namely forests, do not regenerate as quickly as in the plains. Pace of utilisation has to be adapted to it**

✓ **The benefits of their natural resources (water, forest, land...) is going outside and there is no proper compensation (namely in case of dams or ban of utilisation of national parks) and even this legal compensation does not reach the populations.**

✓ **Salesmen and outside companies plunder illegally the mountain resources and, in the cities everything is available in plenty, whereas the restrictions on the use of mountain resources by mountain people are very strict: mountain people have been deprived from the control of their own resources**

### ◇ **No recognition of indigenous populations, and, inside those, women.**

✓ **Women are considered and very often consider themselves as inferior and unable to perform many task, technical as well as managerial. They are also responsible of their own exploitation and oppression since they are the ones who educate their sons and daughters and transmit these values**

> They are subject to all types of violence, physical, psychical and social. The restrictions imposed on them at times of pregnancy, child delivery, periods are particularly harsh in the mountainous areas and in total contradiction with the work load still expected from them at these times, when, on the contrary, they would need special attention and care.

- > They do not have equal access to education, health and decision making bodies.`
- > But, women are more conscious than men of the fragility and critical state of their resources, such as wood and fodder, because they are generally the ones who look for them. Therefore, they feel more responsible and are more willing to protect these resources. Their better awareness allows them to organise themselves better.
- ✓ **The transmission of knowledge is ceasing, parents do not transmit their “historical” knowledge, because the models of societies are imposed by the plains and the value of mountain cultures is not recognised**
  - > Spirituality is typical of mountain people, but is losing its momentum in some areas, through globalisation and the interference of other forms of religiosity.
  - > Denial of one’s own culture, violence on women and children, alcoholism are the consequences of the functioning of the social structures. They have to be fought in their causes and mere prohibition of alcohol, for example, is not a correct answer.
  - > Convincing not only the men, but even the women is a slow process. Nevertheless, once they have successfully fulfilled the tasks, technical as well as managerial, they were considered unfit for, not only themselves but also men do realise their misconception. They become proud and the men start recognising that women and men should have equal rights since they are the two wheels of the same cart.
- ✓ **How blend local knowledge, know how and technique with imported ones? For example, Tibetan or any local medicine has its own efficiency and should be recognised as such.**
- ✓ **What is culture: Is it a certain relation between a society and its resources and surroundings? What do people want to change, what do they want to preserve? How to protect their cultures from the sudden irruption of outside world and its technical innovations and dependency to the market?**
- ✓ **What is development? In any case, buffers should be established in order to allow the mountain people to avail technological innovations without having to renounce the specificities and positive sides of their identity.**
- ◇ **NGOs are extremely numerous and very different the ones from the others:**
  - ✓ some are just taking the role of governments and are often merely a link between the populations and their administrations.
  - ✓ too many have a donor driven approach and want to impose whatever they have to offer to the communities,
  - ✓ some are too much in a hurry to obtain results and publicise them and do not allow the populations the time to really interiorise the results of development.
  - ✓ some manipulate the societies they pretend to be working for.
  - ✓ nevertheless, some inform people about their rights and/or provide information and technical training, establish links with other communities and bring technical as well as managerial innovations, and help local communities mastering them.
- ◇ **At all levels, more local power and democracy are required.**
  - ✓ Violent militancy seems to be quite specific of mountains and is responsible for the departure of men and, especially, youngsters.
  - ✓ At the community level, all existing decision making structure having proven efficient should be allowed to work in lieu of imposed outside structures
  - ✓ Likewise, there should be distinct rules and regulations for distinct eco-zones, for plains and mountains.
  - ✓ The populations should have their say before any decision concerning them or their territory should be taken.
  - ✓ There is a necessity of absolute transparency at all levels about the source, purpose and amount of funds, their utilisation... : a mechanism of control of all bodies having any activity in an area (whether belonging to government or NGO) should be introduced,
  - ✓ The harshness of environmental conditions and the remoteness alter greatly the quality of the services locally available. As an example, school masters, health posts or nursery in-charges do not perform their duties in a

correct manner, are even missing the majority of times. When they originate from the place they take advantage of their status of government employees and exploit the local communities.

- ✓ Thus, these local communities need to have the control on these local service providers.
- ✓ All decisions should be taken at the adequate level: for small projects local and quick decisions should be taken by the concerned communities, and all communities also involved (i.e. in the case of hydro power, for example, the people down stream should not be affected without proper compensation and agreement)
- ✓ Local resources are stolen by the outside. Local communities should be properly compensated and, above all, manage them for their own benefit.
- ✓ Above all, resources, namely forests, land, NTFPs, pastures, land have to be preserved and controlled by the local communities, not by companies or contractors or central governments if one wants to exploit them (eco-tourism).
- ✓ Financial independence is an absolute must in order to empower people and make them realise that they can achieve things and solve locally number of their problems, as they were doing before central powers deprive them of their initiative and creativeness, but it is also a necessity imposed on the mountain, who have to bear the burden the so called sustainability of investments and maintenance of equipment, such as energy devices, when plain populations have only to pay for the services of these equipment.
- ✓ Livelihood structures of people living in conservation areas should be allowed to continue
- ◇ **At the same time, the necessity of linkages networking and organisation between the different communities is strongly felt as well as the need of a vertical structuration.**
- ✓ Both bottom-up (power and decision) and top down (information and organisation) approaches and processes are equally necessary.
- ✓ When a technique has been successful it should be broadcasted and the central decision makers should include it in their policies.
- ✓ A lot of information is present at one place and missing elsewhere. International linkages should be considered

#### ISSUES EMERGING FROM THE TRANS-HIMALAYAN GROUP THIRD SESSION OF THE YUKSAM CONFERENCE

##### 1. Our identity and our values :

- i. Many of us though in different countries often suffer an identity crisis as most of us belong to the Tibetan culture which is predominantly Buddhist, but presently live in countries that are either Hindu or Islamic.
- ii. We have many unique traditional value systems that help us live in harmony with nature, these need to be preserved and promoted in the face of modernisation.
- iii. The condition of women in our areas is comparatively better than people of other elevations but still their role in decision making forums is very limited.

##### 2. Sensitive Geo-politics:

Due to the geo-political changes in the past few decades with the occupation of Tibet by China and the subsequent closure of border trade, and the conflict between India and Pakistan, the people of our areas have been severely affected, resulting in

- i. Change of livelihood and urban migration
- ii. Livestock depletion due to loss of traditional pasture land.
- iii. Change in our nomadic lifestyle as the governments of the present countries discourage such lifestyle.

##### 3. Economy :

We have many natural resources that are unique to our area like cashmere fibre and many herbs and medicinal plants but these are very difficult to transport. Therefore we need to promote skills in local processing and value addition.

This will provide local employment to our people while also reducing the bulk for transport. We also need to develop markets and harness the full potential of these indigenous products so that our people can have a livelihood without having to leave the community.

4. Energy :

- i. Since most of our communities live in isolated small villages with population often in hundreds, electricity is a major problem. We feel that the answer lies in decentralised micro hydro schemes where possible and solar photovoltaic in other places because one common characteristic of our area is that we have lots of sunny days in a year.
- ii. We believe that the management and maintenance of such power projects is best handled by the local community.
- iii. Electricity is needed not only for lighting but also for introducing appropriate technology and tools that can help us in making better use of locally available resources, while at the same time help reduce drudgery from our lives.

5. Agriculture :

- i. Our agricultural season is very short and we can grow only one crop in a year
- ii. Irrigable land is very limited as water is very scarce here.
- iii. Depleting glaciers due to global warming poses a great challenge all of our areas as trans-Himalayan region being in the rain-shadow, depends wholly on glacier-melt waters of irrigation as well as drinking water.

6. Education:

- i. Most of our areas share a low level of education and we share similar problems in the proper functioning of our schools
- ii. The education system which is very decentralised and suited to the lowlanders is not relevant to our culture and environment. Therefore we need to struggle for decentralised and locally relevant curriculum and text books or cards.
- iii. Since we do not have local teachers, absenteeism by teachers posted from outside is common problem. For future we need to groom our own local teachers.
- iv. Such changes can be brought by the close cooperation of community, government and NGOs