

Scientists tackle poverty in South Asia

Scientists are investigating the links between ecosystems and poverty in South Asia to identify ways in which the poor are dependent on the services provided by ecosystems in the region. This increased understanding of environment-poverty linkages will be used to propose the research that will lead to technical, economic, legal and institutional interventions for the better management of ecosystem services. These interventions will contribute towards the improved flow of services, especially to the poor, and thus aid in the fight to achieve poverty alleviation in one of the world's poorest regions.

The global agenda, which was defined through the international adoption of eight Millennium Development Goals, placed its primary emphasis on the eradication of extreme poverty and hunger. Protection and enhancement of ecosystem services was identified as an essential step to achieve this.

The Ecosystem Services and Poverty Alleviation Study in South Asia (ESPASSA) project is one of four regional projects commissioned by UK agencies (NERC 1, DFID2 and ESRC3) to facilitate the development of an "Ecosystem Services and Poverty Alleviation (ESPA)" programme. Concurrent Situation Analyses are being undertaken in four of the World's poorest regions (China, Amazon, Africa and India & the Hindu Kush-Himalayan region). The Situation Analyses will establish baselines to define the current status of and relationships between ecosystems and poverty in each region. The baselines will then be used to underpin the development of strategic initiatives to instigate changes, as well as to assist in measuring their impact.

ESPASSA focuses on five countries in the Hindu Kush-Himalayan Region: India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Nepal and Bhutan. This Situation Analysis will provide a synthesis of information on the current status of and trends in the prominent ecosystem services that are most important to the well-being of the poor in the South Asian region, in conjunction with an assessment of the key ecosystem management functions for maximising poverty alleviation. Emphasis will be placed on assessing how direct drivers, such as climate change and monsoon variability, and indirect drivers, like demographic dynamics and trade & investment measures, affect the flow of services and in turn the level of poverty. The synthesis will be supported by stakeholder engagement leading to a regional assessment of information and knowledge needs with regard to ecosystem services and poverty alleviation. The need for capacity building through skills and knowledge exchanges will also be assessed, and specific research requirements that can yield poverty alleviation outcomes will be identified.

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The Pakistan Situation Analysis will focus on the Himalayan mountain ecosystem which skirts Pakistan's northern border in a both south-east, south-west direction, and which provides a diverse range of services both to the national economy and locally. The mountain range forms the source of the Indus River. Its mountain glaciers and primary forests act, respectively, as a water provider and water regulator, sustaining downstream agriculture, freshwater and marine fisheries. The forests provide timber, fuel wood, fodder, non-timber forest products (NTFPs), are a rich repository of biodiversity and act as carbon sinks. In its entirety, the mountain ecosystem is a valued tourism resource for Pakistan.

The Himalayan ecosystem has degraded severely over time, due to both anthropogenic and natural causes. Uncontrolled deforestation has reduced the ecosystem's ability to act as a water regulator. The resulting soil erosion has contributed to flooding and dam sedimentation, especially the Tarbela Dam. Global warming has increased glacial melt and there is a growing concern that an initial surge in water flows and more floods will be followed by severe water scarcity. In addition, biodiversity loss has also been recorded, both due to habitat destruction and unregulated hunting of wildlife.

The debate on the level of poverty in the country continues amidst government claims of an exceptional decline in poverty; the government has recently suggested that the population below the poverty line has decreased to around 25 percent, 6-7 percent lower than estimates in 2000-01. However, this does not correlate with independent analysis: DFID for instance, claims the poverty count is as high as 40 percent. There is thus a degree of scepticism over claimed poverty statistics. The poverty context in Pakistan is characterised by a number of key factors including a large poverty spread across the country's rural-urban divide, across its provinces and across its ethnic boundaries.. Taking a boarder definition of poverty, which incorporates the concept of vulnerability, it is clear that the incidence of poverty in Pakistan may be even higher than current estimates suggest.

Forest-dependent communities and livestock herders subsist on the lowest rung of the poverty ladder. Their growing numbers stand in stark contrast to the degrading ecosystem which forms the basis of their livelihoods. The opposing pulls have given rise to a phenomenon, referred to in the literature as the poverty-environment nexus. In other words, degradation and poverty react adversely in a vicious downward spiral. However, communities rarely degrade the resource base from which they draw sustenance. If they do so, it is because they are reduced to it by a combination of management failures and perverse economic incentives. The Situation Analysis for Pakistan will assess and analyse the natural, human and institutional causes for ecosystem degradation, with a view to formulating interventions across the legal, policy and regulatory spectrum.

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The ESPASSA consortium led by Dr. R. K Pachauri from TERI in India consists of over 25 scientists from four institutions from within the region (TERI¹, IUCN², BRAC³ and SDPI⁴) and the Institute for SWIMMER⁵ from the University of Liverpool in the UK. ESPASSA will deliver a full report on its findings in early 2008 but ongoing updates on developments along with interim deliverables can be accessed via the project website (www.espassa.org). The website also provides the opportunity for people to contact the ESPASSA consortium and input into the development of the Situation Analysis.

¹ The Energy and Resources Institute, India

² The World Conservation Union, Asia

³ Building Resources Across Communities, Bangladesh

⁴ Sustainable Development Policy Institute, Pakistan

⁵ Institute for Sustainable Water, Integrated Management & Ecosystem Research

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