Dealing with Transition: Conceptual Issues for Gender and Sustainable Development from the Uttarakhand Experience

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This presentation is based on observations emerging out of ongoing work in the lower/outer hills of the Himalayas in the north Indian state of Uttarakhand amongst what can be termed peri-urban communities. By this, I refer to households that occupy a ‘betwixt and between’ category, no longer completely (or at all) rural (that way of life either increasingly unviable or no longer pursued since high land values have resulted in the sale of landholdings), but not yet urban (due to the nature of their typically – but not necessarily -- insecure footholds in the urban economy). The wider region in which this study is located has in the past two decades undergone tremendous changes, politically, socio-economically, and environmentally, connected to the dual processes of economic liberalisation and the formation of a new mountain state. In tandem, these have contributed to significant changes in land use patterns (an increasing shift from agricultural to non-agricultural uses), new employment opportunities, and a wider range of livelihood patterns. For many, these have resulted in patterns of social mobility that would have been inconceivable in an earlier time; for others in a certain social and economic marginalization, the full extent of which may be hidden due to the façade of well-being afforded by a certain level of participation in a thriving consumer society. My interest here is to pose some exploratory questions about these people who are at different stages of migratory paths and processes of resettlement, who are neither of the village nor of the big city, and who appear thus far not to have caught the attention of mountain development discussions.