Old Problems, New Knowledge:
Exploring the Disconnects Between Research and Policy in the Greater Himalayas

Dr. Ritu Verma, ICIMOD
Dr. Piers M. Blaikie, University of East Anglia
Dr. Joshua S. S. Muldavin, Sarah Lawrence College
Environment and Gender

• Cross-cutting
  – Gender and indigenous knowledge
  – Gender environmental management
  – Context of out-migration, ‘feminization’ of agricultural labour, adaptation to climate change, globalization, etc.

• Political ecology framework
  – Relation between power and knowledge
  – Struggles over material resources are simultaneously struggles over cultural meanings
  – Different cultural and political sites of contestation, including what qualifies as ‘science’, ‘fact’ and ‘development’
Research vs. Policy

- Surely, new knowledge should inform policy reform?
- Big volume of high quality of new, policy relevant knowledge on environmental issues is produced
- “New” knowledge (may be generations old but “new” to wider audiences)
- New knowledge not taken up by policy
  - ignored (most common outcome)
  - rejected (example The Shillong Declaration)
  - subverted
  - selectively used to window dress other political projects
Rationalist View of Research and Policy Making

• Linear, reductionist, apolitical
• Simplified trajectory, untroubled passage: knowledge is transmitted to policy makers who respond by putting it on the agenda, push it and implement it
• Normative and straightforward, but often naive and over-optimistic
• Failure blamed on poor implementation or lack of political will
Discursive and Political View of Research and Policy Making (Blaikie and Muldavin)

- Political process
- Competing representations, discursively produced
- Complexity and diversity in governance, policy making and government
- Policy formulation, negotiation, contestation and implementation do not take place in socio-cultural and political-economic vacuums
- Cannot escape fierce and historically laden power relations, which are deeply gendered
- Represents knowledge, interests and decision-making of “big men”
Exploring Disconnects

• New knowledge and policy reform
• What is *supposed* to happen as a result of new knowledge, and what *actually* happens?
• Why do old, de-bunked theories continue to circulate and hold sway in the face of new evidence?
THED - Theory of Himalayan Environmental Degradation

- Dominant environmental narrative 1970s for two decades
- Environmental degradation – imminent crisis
  - Driven by population growth, over-grazing, cultivation on steep slopes, clearance of forests, unsustainable agriculture and use of resources
- Rejected in the 1980s, THED overplayed
  - ‘Backwardness’, technological ‘incompetence’, neo-Malthusian
  - Under-estimated complexity, spatial variability, over-generalized, over-dramatized ‘crisis’
- India - fortress conservation of forests
  - Deforestation and erosion, as grounds for increased regulation, exclusion of local control and management
  - Centralized control and sale of timber by elites
Gender ‘Mainstreaming’

- Old WID approach: “add women and stir”
- Characteristics
  - Gender focal point
  - Simple question of numbers
  - Add-on, annex, after-thought to “real” science
  - Lip service, window dressing, shallow analysis, under-resourced
- Discourse of equality, while masking business as usual
- Great deal of evidence that it has not worked, and will not work (disregards persistent relations of power and resistance/backlash)
- Yet, continues to be upheld by many organizations
Discursive and Political Lens

• Complex, incomplete, disputed, and produced by voices that are heard first/easily (research stations, “progressive” farmers, elites, men, and consultants, etc.)
• Narratives of control (narrative closure)
• Black-boxing controversies and institutionalized networks of scientific allies (corridor politics)
• Reducing ‘development’ to a technical problem that requires technical ‘solutions’
• Blue-prints used across regions without regard to diversity and heterogeneity
Political Ecology Analysis

- Policy making is messy, political, uncertain and complex and therefore “recommendations” in consultancy style are not always useful.
- Local context is a key defining factor in the way policies play out; as is the type/form of government and space for maneuver by those who are most affected.
- Policy reform is long, arduous, and the story is never ending.
- Sometimes gains are made, and then lost with new parties, leaders, managers, political shifts, etc.
- What knowledge? Legitimating power of discourses.
- Framing the issue: Whose voices get heard? Who gets silenced, suppressed and ignored?
- Translation of knowledge for different audiences.
- Create new audiences and modes of outreach.
- Policy making should focus “upwards” and “downwards”.
- Alternative visions of development: GNH.
We cannot emphasize power relations enough: Underlying many policies, are powerful interests that allow for resource capture, wealth accumulation and the concentration of political-economic power for a few individuals, actors and investors. This is a deeply gendered process.