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

Ritu Verma, Piers M Blaikie and Joshua SS Muldavin

The Bhutan+10 conference focuses on two major policy issues in mountain contexts, namely, environment and gender. They cross cut and overlap with one another other in many important ways, including gender issues of indigenous knowledge and environmental management in the context of out-migration, the ‘feminization’ of agricultural labour, environmental justice, and climate change. This paper examines broader issues of gender and environment by placing them distinctly within a political ecology framework, thereby allowing an analysis of relations between power and knowledge and the way that struggles over material resources are simultaneously struggles over cultural meanings. Within such a frame, it is possible to trace relations of power and knowledge within different cultural and political sites of contest, including what qualifies as ‘science’, ‘fact’, and ‘development’. It argues that although a great deal of new knowledge is generated that should inform and facilitate policy reform, this is not necessarily the case. Out-dated theories that continue to be engaged, despite being debunked by other researchers and scientists, are examined to reflect on the disconnects between knowledge, research, and policy. These include theories of ‘gender mainstreaming’ and the ‘theory of Himalayan degradation’ (THED). The paper argues that policy processes are often complex and contradictory. To the extent that multiple disconnects exist between research and policy, a political and discursive lens sheds important explanatory insights on the long shelf-life of malfunctioning theories. Some practical suggestions to palliate these disconnects are suggested.