

Regionally comparable interdisciplinary research

The two main topics of this project are land use options and tenure and institutions, both of which require policy and field-based research. The situation of, and recent developments in land use and tenure are different in each of the countries, making a regional comparison interesting and worthwhile for drawing lessons for policy. Common protocols will be developed to make this possible.

Interdisciplinary working groups will be formed from among the partners to study land use options and tenure and institutions, supported by a group working on geographic information and participatory 3-dimensional modelling.

Regional sharing and exchange

ICIMOD will facilitate learning and experience sharing among partners, stakeholders, and the wider professional network through various means in Bhutan, India and Nepal as well as other relevant regional member countries. Anyone interested in joining the Jhumia Network can access it at <http://in.groups.yahoo.com/group/jhumias/>

Regional Project on Shifting Cultivation (RPSC) Promoting Innovative Policy and Development Options for Improving Shifting Cultivation in the Eastern Himalayas

Regional Project Partners

The regional project on shifting cultivation is implemented through collaboration with relevant government departments from the participating countries as well as the following implementing partners:

Bhutan

- Policy and Planning Division, Ministry of Agriculture
- Council for Renewable Natural Resources Research of Bhutan

India

- NEPED, Department of Agriculture, Nagaland
- State Agriculture Research Station (SARS), Nagaland
- The Missing Link (TML)

Nepal

- Local Initiatives for Biodiversity, Research and Development (LIBIRD)
- Nepal Chepang Association (NCA)
- Nepal Federation of Indigenous Nationalities (NEFIN)

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Shifting cultivation in the eastern Himalayas

The eastern Himalayas are a focal area in the regional climate change debate and very rich in biodiversity. At the same time, they are inhabited by large numbers of people whose principal livelihood is shifting cultivation and who have been practising this in an integrated manner for centuries. Shifting cultivators belong to a diversity of ethnic groups and minorities, and are frequently among the poorest and most marginalised.

Two opposing perspectives prevail on shifting cultivation. Many policy makers, researchers, and members of the public believe that shifting cultivation is universally unsustainable, wasteful, and destructive to forests and wildlife. Therefore, most policies aim to control the practice through a variety of measures, or to 'wean' the people away from it by inducing them to take up alternative land use options. There is another group that advocates leaving shifting cultivators to carry on as they are without external influence. These two viewpoints are essentially opposed, and neither recognises the need for a pragmatic approach to deal with the livelihood issues of the cultivators and the health of the ecosystem.

Farmers still practise shifting cultivation despite government efforts to reduce the practice, as they know this practice best suits the type of land they have,

"Shifting cultivation must be recognised as an agricultural and adaptive forest management practice. [...] It is imperative to provide an enabling environment in order to address urgent livelihood and ecological concerns and to empower shifting cultivators as practitioners of rotational agroforestry to become active participants in the decision making and policy processes that impact them most."

(Debating Shifting Cultivation in the Eastern Himalayas 2006)

where fallow forests are essential for soil conservation. Why would they leave their land fallow for years, if it were possible to cultivate it permanently? They have embedded this practice strongly in the way their societies are organised and in their traditional knowledge and customs,



to the extent that shifting cultivation has become inextricably linked with their social security and cultural identity. This is one of the main reasons why policies that force farmers to take up alternative livelihoods are often counterproductive, both in terms of poverty alleviation and natural resource conservation.

ICIMOD's regional project on shifting cultivation

With the RPSC project, ICIMOD offers the idea that shifting cultivation should be allowed for those farmers who wish to practise it. The current problems they are facing should be addressed in an inclusive and adaptive approach. Shifting cultivators need research and development support, as well as a more appreciative policy environment, to help them improve and adapt their shifting cultivation practices to the present day situation.

The project is based on the hypothesis that shifting cultivation, if improved and rationalised as an agroforestry system, has a high potential for poverty alleviation, food security, and biodiversity conservation. Adaptive natural resource management strategies and improved governance will increase the socio-ecological resilience of these mountain communities in the face of globalisation and climate change. Recent innovations in several parts of the eastern Himalayas have shown that this is a viable approach.

The project aims to contribute to the livelihood security of the shifting cultivators in the eastern Himalayas by researching policy options that support the improvement of shifting cultivation systems in terms of natural resource management and livelihoods and tenure security. The programme is implemented in Bhutan, North East India, and Nepal with financial support from the International Development Research Centre (). It sets itself aside from other natural resource management projects, by focusing on the specific needs and rights of shifting cultivators, understanding and accepting that they are different from those of other farmers and forest users.

Approaches

Engaging policy and decision makers in dialogue

From the beginning, policy and decision makers at various levels will be engaged in dialogue on the issues most affecting shifting cultivators today. They will help identify concrete policy concerns for which specific research questions will be formulated. This is to ensure that the research results will support informed decision making and more appropriate research and development support for shifting cultivators.

