

Exploring the Feasibility of a University Programme on Sustainable Mountain Development in the Hindu Kush Himalaya



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FOR MOUNTAINS AND PEOPLE

The biodiversity rich mountains of the Hindu Kush Himalaya (HKH) support the livelihoods of people, both in the mountains and in downstream regions. Ensuring their resilience is of utmost importance. The highlands and lowlands share economic, ecological, cultural, and social activities. While modernization has given downstream regions more economic power, the mountains remain keepers of sacred traditions.

Breath-taking mountain landscapes—deep valleys, serene lakes, fresh waterfalls, and snow-capped blue-mountains—and the people who live there attract tourists to the Himalayan highlands. Upstream and downstream communities are also connected by ancient tradition. People from the plains travel up to sacred pilgrimage sites in the mountains.

Understanding this symbiosis of co-existence is important, and tertiary educational systems can play a big part in this. Educational programmes can also help ensure the sustainability of mountain ecosystems and mountain farming systems.

Given the rugged terrain and fragile mountain ecosystems, government-led socio-economic development interventions is extremely resource intensive. As a result, development projects have not reached through to the policy formulation aspect of development plans.

Investments in mountain development have been low because very few studies have been conducted on mountain ecosystems, given their difficult access. Therefore, there is little, if any, empirical evidence to lead to policy formulation on sustainable mountain development.

Although several universities in HKH countries offer undergraduate and postgraduate degrees on the subject, the educational programmes seem to share few commonalities. Credits from one university cannot be transferred to another even among Himalayan Universities Consortium (HUC) members.

On other hand, there is a wealth of information on mountain issues documented by the International Centre for Integrated Mountain Development (ICIMOD). So far, no study has been conducted to gauge whether these sustainable mountain development issues of HUC members can lead to meaningful university programme among HUC member institutions.

A daunting task ahead is promoting inter-university cooperation among HUC members through knowledge-sharing and collaborative research. For this to happen, the ICIMOD Mountain Chair is expected to visit HUC members institutions as an ambassador to study the possibility of having a common curriculum across all HUC universities within the framework of respective academic quality assurance procedures.

The study is expected to lead to an international conference (the International Conference of Think Tanks on Sustainable Mountain Development) during which further deliberations on various thematic areas will take place. Several think tanks from within the HKH and international institutions from outside the region that have had similar experiences with mountain development will be invited to share their experiences through a conference paper presentation. This will be one of the first activities taken up by the Mountain Chair and should lead to the development of a common regional educational programme across HKH universities that are HUC members.

A network of academics and researchers who can work on educational programmes of mutual interest and benefit can be established by securing pledges to promote such commonly established and understood issues in the HKH.

In the long-run, a common university module will benefit university students who will be able to participate in exchange programmes without losing an academic year. With easy credit transfers between universities, they will be able to experience the cultural life of their host countries, communities, and universities. The university students will also have the potential to act as goodwill ambassadors of their respective home countries to their destination, fostering mutual closeness between HUC member universities and countries.

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Born in a rural hamlet to a farming family, Phanchung completed his primary education in his home village of Yurung. He moved to Southwest Bhutan in the mid-1970s and completed his secondary education in 1980, graduating from Samtse Central School. He was the first Eastern Bhutanese—an ethnic minority—to enroll in the school, where students were predominantly of Southern Bhutanese origin.

He received his pre-university degree from Sherubtse College, Bhutan, and was later selected to pursue a Bachelor of Veterinary Science and Animal Husbandry from the Andhra Pradesh Agricultural University in Hyderabad, India. He began his career in January 1989 as Veterinary Officer and later concurrently as the Principal of the Royal Veterinary Institute, Serbithang, Bhutan.

Meanwhile, the Royal Government of Bhutan initiated a decentralized form of Government by grouping Bhutan into four Zonal Administrations. Social service sectors like Education, Health Engineering and rural development sectors like Agriculture, Animal Husbandry, Irrigation and Forestry were decentralized to the Zonal Administration. Phanchung was appointed the Zonal Animal Husbandry Officer of Zone IV, Yonphula. Later, he served as the Regional Veterinary Officer of the Eastern Region at Dewathang and moved to the Head Office in Thimphu as the Animal Health Officer of the Department of Animal Husbandry.

In early 1990s, the Ministry of Agriculture restructured its organization and one of the outcomes was the establishment of an integrated training institute at Lobesa. Phanchung served in different capacities as the Assistant Professor, Dean of Academic Affairs, Principal, and Head of Department at the College of Natural Resources for 18 years.

Phanchung received his PhD in Animal Nutrition from the University of Melbourne, Australia, and an MSc in Animal Production from the University of Aberdeen, Scotland, UK.

He took over as the Director General of the Department of Research and External Relations, Bhutan in August 2015. Prior to that, he worked as the Manager of the Programmes, Teaching and Learning under the Department of Academic Affairs, Bhutan.

Phanchung is Secretary of the Research and Innovation Committee (RIC) and the Research Degree Committee (RDC), Member of the Academic Board, Programmes Quality Committee, Academic Planning and Resource Committee, University Human Resource Committee, University Academic Staff Selection Committee, University Promotion Committee of Professorial Positions, and several committees of the Royal University of Bhutan.

Phanchung is also the Managing Editor of the *Bhutan Journal of Research and Development*. He is a Member of the Climate Change Coordination Committee of Bhutan appointed by Bhutanese the Prime Minister. He also acts as the External Evaluator of the BSc Degree Thesis of the College of Natural Resources and External Reviewer of the *Bhutan Journal of Natural Resources and Development*. He is the Director of the National Research Fund, Bhutan.