



## IMI-ICIMOD Mountain Conversations

### Re-imagining a post Covid-19 Himalayan Future

Covid-19 has had adverse social, economic and environmental impacts in Indian Himalayan Region (IHR). It has exacerbated old risks and vulnerabilities while creating new challenges such as employment and livelihood, especially in rural areas and that of the returnees from many urban cities.

While cases of Covid-19 in these hill states have been relatively lower compared to the national average, perhaps due to the remoteness and largely rural nature of the region, the financial strain imposed by the pandemic and subsequent lockdowns, public health expenditures and closure of economic activities for months has resulted in huge losses to these already fiscally deficit states of the IHR.

Tourism, which was second-largest employer after agriculture, has been devastated by the pandemic. There are attempts being made to revive the tourism sector but there are apprehensions that many small players would lose out even as there is an emphasis on high-end tourism. Education has also been severely affected. Schools and colleges taking up online learning option have exposed deep digital divide and access to such technologies in rural areas is another challenge.

In the farm sector, restricted labour movement (lockdown and fear of infection), interrupted farming activities in mountains as well as in plains, disrupted food supply from plains, increased food demand in the mountains due to returnee migrants, closure of food processing industry in exporting countries and trade of only essential items<sup>1</sup> has only added to the existing pressures on food security.

Migrants from the hill states, who left their home state mostly due to lack of employment, higher aspirations and for higher education have returned. Though the returnee migrants are extremely vulnerable, they have professional experiences, training and new work ethic which can play an important role in reviving the local economy, if connected with local organisations on a functional platform. There is an urgent need to reskill the returnees for local job markets, leveraging on the natural resources of the region.

IHR states were severely under revenue deficit even before Covid-19 crisis and mostly understaffed, incapable of handling such huge reverse migration, not to mention the deeper economic shocks. By the mid of June 2020, the total number of registered returnees had touched the 1.5 lakh mark in the North eastern states alone with many more set to follow suit.<sup>2</sup>

Moreover, the pandemic has accentuated multi-fold challenges of IHR even as it had a looming climate change crisis facing the region. The impending climate risks in the region has been a

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<sup>1</sup> ICIMOD Policy Paper on Covid-19 Impact and Policy Responses in HKH, 2020

<sup>2</sup> News articles as of 15<sup>th</sup> June 2020

matter of serious concern. Melting permafrost, retreating glaciers, cloudbursts, frequent landslides and other climate related disaster risks, drastic change in agricultural cycles – all these and many more indicators suggest the heavy pressure under which the IHR already wrestles even before the current pandemic. As highlighted in the HIMAP Report, even if global temperature rise is arrested to 1.5 degrees Celsius by the end of this century, the region will see a 1.8 degree Celsius.

In this context of Covid-19, the nine ‘Priorities of the Mountains and people of Hindu Kush Himalaya’ which reflects the SDGs becomes more urgent than ever. Particularly critical in this regard are Priorities 2, 7, 8 and 9<sup>3</sup> which has direct bearing on the economic well-being and resilience of mountain communities and economy.

As the nature of this crisis is unprecedented and its consequences yet to be fully ascertained, state governments and development partners are exploring all possible ways to mitigate its adverse socio-economic impact of Covid-19. The retention, rehabilitation and resettlement of these migrants is crucial for the IHR states. Providing sustainable jobs for the youth is critical. States like Meghalaya have come up with attempts to address these issues by conducting a skill survey of the youth and launching a Restart Meghalaya Mission to revive development work with a focus on key sectors like agriculture, horticulture, fisheries, infrastructure, and High Value, Low Volume sustainable tourism. Nagaland has initiated an e-commerce platform – Yellowchain – to link service providers with clients.

On the other hand, this crisis has also offered an opportunity to explore new and creative ways of kickstarting a new template for a resilient mountain future with emphasis on green skilling, green jobs and green economy. It is an opportune moment to re-engage with the mountain communities, civil society, financial institutions and policymakers on building partnerships and taking collaborative action on policy, research and practice interface for a sustainable mountain development. This calls for building partnerships with existing stakeholders and actors working for the mountain communities and states. The development pathways to a prosperous Himalayan future will require much more active cooperation and synergies from a regional perspective.

To delve into some of these pressing concerns, this *IMI-ICIMOD Mountain Conversations* series on ‘Re-imagining a post Covid-19 Himalayan Future’ will be divided into two parts:

### **1. Resilient livelihood in the mountains : Green skilling our youth for farm and off-farm opportunities**

*A discussion on emerging opportunities for a post Covid-19 mountain economy with a focus on building green and digital skillsets applicable to both farm and off-farm sector.*

- *Re-skilling mountain youth for robust local economy*
- *Strengthening agri-entrepreneurial ecosystem in key sectors*
- *Bridging the Digital Divide: Innovative ICT interventions*

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<sup>3</sup> Priority 2: Promote sustainable production systems to assure food security, nutrition security, and income for mountain people, with particular attention to the changing roles of women in agriculture.

Priority 7: Ensure integration between adaptation to climate change, disaster risk reduction, and sustainable development for the mountains through evidence-based decision making.

Priority 8: Build resilient, equitable, and inclusive mountain communities empowered by economic opportunity and investment in mountain infrastructure and connectivity.

Priority 9: Promote a mountain-specific agenda for achieving the SDGs through increased regional cooperation among and between mountain regions and nations.

## 2. Building partnerships, securing futures: collaborative action on policy, research and practice for sustainability and scale

*A discussion on the need for robust, seamless partnerships of all key stakeholders working for the common goal of resilient mountain economy.*

- *Policy initiatives during the pandemic: Concerns from the mountain perspective*
- *Functional, collaborative platforms of multi-stakeholders for knowledge-based research, policy and ground action networks*
- *Effective investments and recovery packages for resilient and sustainable mountain states*

These issues emerging from Covid-19 impact on IHR converges with priorities of both ICIMOD's 'Call for Action' and IMI's core area of work on sustainable livelihoods and youth empowerment. It will build on the existing work, complementary expertise and presence of both ICIMOD and IMI in the region, and engage with relevant partners for a more holistic understanding of the issues and collaborative action opportunities.

### Re-imagining a post Covid-19 Himalayan Future (Tentative Agenda)

<b>Session 1: Resilient livelihood in the mountains : Green skilling our youth for farm and off-farm opportunities</b> <i>A discussion on emerging opportunities for a post Covid-19 mountain economy with a focus on building green and digital skillset applicable to both farm and off-farm sector.</i> <b>Date: 30<sup>th</sup> September 2020</b> <b>Time: 3:00 PM – 5:30 PM IST</b> <i>Moderator: Eklabya Sharma, DDG, ICIMOD</i>		
<i>Time</i>	<i>Topic</i>	<i>Speaker</i>
10 mins	Welcome and context setting	Eklabya Sharma, ICIMOD
15 mins	Release of IMI-IABT report on A Rapid Assessment Study on the Outreach, Satisfaction and Efficacy of Digital Classes during the COVID-19 closure of Higher Education in IHR	Satyadeep Chettri, IMI/ Aadya Singh, IABT
10 mins	Introducing the subject: Towards a resilient livelihood in the IHR	Sushil Ramola, President, IMI
15 mins	Re-skilling mountain youth for robust local economy	Vijay Mahajan Director, Rajiv Gandhi Centre of Contemporary Studies
15 mins	Strengthening nature-based and agri-entrepreneurial ecosystem for resilient livelihood	Dhrupad Choudhury, ICIMOD and Nand Kishor Agarwal, ICIMOD
10 mins	Bridging the Digital Divide: Innovative ICT interventions	Krishna Rautela, Asian Development Bank
15 mins	Creating a network of clean energy based Sustainable Livelihoods	Huda Jaffer, SELCO Foundation and Nanki Kaur, ICIMOD
30 mins	Q and A/Discussion	Led by moderator
15 mins	Action Points	Led by moderator

*\*The second session in this conversation series will be held in the second half of October 2020.*