

THEME 03:

**IMPACT OF EGALITARIANISM, DEMOCRATIC
POLITICS AND CURRENT SOCIAL POLICIES ON
CHANGING PATTERNS OF SOCIAL INEQUALITY**

Triggering Socio-Economic Equity in the Highlands of South Asia: Emerging Challenges and Opportunities

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Hill and mountain regions constitute a significant part of geography, eco-system, natural resources and socio-cultural structures of South Asia. Being located in crucial geo-strategic regions, hill and mountain regions serve as water towers, a source of huge biodiversity reserves and provides energy security to a vast portion of low lands in South Asia. However, this geographical landmass also constitutes among the most development deprived regions and confronts with both intense locational disparity and in-built socio-economic inequity. Political systems have to a large extent made the protracted policy and development interventions ineffective in these geographies where infrastructural backwardness and institutional laggardness have been highly conspicuous. The outward migration of productive human resources have only added to this alienation syndrome. At the same time, bringing deeper and wider development in the highlands and ensuring human security therein could also change the national security dynamics based on orthodox variety of security thinking.

There are definite changes both in the development thinking related to the highlands and also on the approaches to policy interventions across South Asia. The economic reforms and the instruments of globalizations have opened several newer opportunities particularly in areas of raising rural productivity, re-orienting mountain agricultural heritage and injecting newer occupational ventures. The fresh initiatives on connectivity triggered by sub-regional and regional cooperation, technological refurbishments and more critically market access to the produces of the highlands could bring about visible social mobilization. These connectivities could reopen the borders for trade, tourism, and other commercial activities and the subsequent borderlands development could further change the basic structures of the livelihood and income generation patterns in the region. This could bring the geo-strategic stability. The traditional livelihood support and commercial cultivations like tea could be supplemented by huge global demands of high value organic products and floriculture and horticulture supply chains.

However, the emerging challenges are of very serious dimensions. The first being the likely impact of climate change on the livelihood practices and pattern in the highlands. The changing nature of calamities in these highly disaster prone areas and the trans-border environmental injuries topped by unregulated flows of forces and agents and their commercial ventures under the globalization process could in fact adversely affect the very sustainability of these fragile geographies. These could threaten the carrying capacity, pull apart the traditional institutions, trigger disharmony among the communities and instabilities in the political economies.

Against this backdrop, this paper also examines the development efficacy enhancing roles of regional organization like SAARC and international development agencies like the UNDP, ADB and the World Bank.

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