

Concept Paper

A

Two-Day Consultation on Redefining People's Role in Effective and Sustainable Conservation, Consumption and Management of Water in the Himalayas.

Background:

It is a lucid fact that Water is essential for all forms of life. Water, due to its rapidly depleting resources and increasing demands has become a crisis commodity in today's world. This problem is common with developing as well as developed nations, but the countries with noticeably high population growth rate have to pay a much larger cost of this growing scarcity of water, especially of drinking water. Some of the developing countries like India are comparatively richer in terms of natural water resources like river systems, glaciers, fresh water lakes etc. But keeping in view the haphazard urbanization, industrialization, commercialization and lack of policy level measures towards the distribution and sustainable management of water in the country, it seems really inevitable that these existing water resources will fail to suffice our requirements in coming time leading to a critical situation.

In Indian context, the Himalayan region is the second biggest source of water for more than half of the country after the monsoon rainfall. The Himalayas are home to some of the world's largest river systems like Ganga, Yamuna, Indus, Brahmaputra etc. and contribute majorly to the water supply systems for agricultural, industrial, commercial and domestic usage in non-peninsular parts of the country. In current scenario, a critical change is taking place in this "water-rich" Himalayan region that not only reveals out the myths about adequate availability of water in the region, but also endorses the critical need of sustainable water management measures in the region. Every year, there are at least one or two hilly states that fall under 'drought' conditions and suffer with severe scarcity of water. The government as well as the public does not seem much prepared for finding an effective solution to this growing problem. The "Mountains are lacking water" may sound odd, but it is obvious that unless proper measures will be taken, such time may approach soon.

Issues/Concerns:

The water-related issues are more complex in the hilly areas as compared to those in the plain areas. Here, most of the people depend upon the natural water resources like perennial streams, rivers, freshwater lakes etc. Some of the most concerning issues that affect the current water-scenario in the Himalayas are-

Lack of Sanitation & Water Conservation Measures

The Himalayan region has a number of perennial streams that originate from the glaciers situated at high altitudes. These streams serve as a prominent source of drinking water to a number of hilly villages. During their downward flow, these streams pass through big or small human settlements where they get polluted with various kinds of waste materials. The people inhabiting the areas ahead are bound to consume this water which is usually dirty and unsafe but they do not have any other alternatives.

Adverse Geo-physical Conditions

The geo-physical conditions of the mountainous region make it even worse where rural people have to spend hours each day walking miles to collect water. Not only the rural areas, but also the semi-urban areas in hilly region are more or less dependent on the small streams or other natural water resources that are located at considerably long distances from the human settlements. This avoidable investment in time, which could be devoted to other income-generating activities or education, has only perpetuated the poverty cycle in many regions.

Lack of Community Participation in Water Management

Community participation has been recognized as a crucial element in effective management of water. It is clear that community participation means giving power to the community to undertake the responsibilities of their water supply systems. But the most concerning thing is that most of the times, community participation is seen only during the construction phase of the system and they are not prepared enough to own and sustain the system in future.

Fundamental Flaws in Policy

Issues of immense importance like the fair and proper distribution and supply of water among the domestic, commercial, industrial and agricultural sectors are not aptly addressed in the policy of the government both at center as well as the state level. The

existing water supply systems do not completely suffice the domestic requirements of safe drinking water while the industrial and commercial set-ups get water in abundance. Sometimes, it is seen that the roles and responsibilities of government departments and other agencies are unclear and there exists a lack of co-ordination.

Class-Based Disparities

The socio-cultural dimensions in the Himalayas are very complex as the categorization of people on the basis of caste and religion makes it a problematic issue where a majority of the population depends upon the same natural water resource. In some instances, the weaker sections of the society do not get the water in proper quality and quantity. As this issue is more complex and dynamic to understand and intervene, it becomes very important to carefully find out some sound solutions to this problem and to ensure just and fair distribution and availability of safe drinking water.

Problems concerning the women

In the Himalayan region, the principle users and collectors of water in rural households are women. In hilly areas, the normal everyday work of a rural woman is comparatively much more than that of a rural woman inhabiting a village in plain area. Thus, the women of hilly areas continue to bear many of the costs associated with increasing water scarcity which requires women to travel long distances to fetch water for daily household needs. Due to this, they are bound to overburden themselves with loads of work and to become vulnerable to physical and mental sickness.

Mountain Forum Himalayas: A Platform for Sustainable Mountain Development

Mountain Forum Himalayas (MFH) is a multi-stakeholder platform mandated to address issues concerning the people of Himalayan region by promoting joint, collective and participatory actions. MFH has developed a long term approach towards strengthening governance, disaster management, assurance of sustainable livelihood and water related issues in the Himalayan region.

MFH, being a platform for sustainable mountain development, has been working in the two Himalayan states of the country since long back. MFH has taken the initiative to reconstitute the communities for the sustainable consumption and management of water by promoting the traditional modes of water conservation. We strongly acknowledge the capacities and roles of local people, institutions, organizations and *panchayats* in

Community Based Water Management. The indigenous knowledge and techniques of water conservation and management they have been practicing since ages are the need of the hour in this time of water crisis.

CASA: A National Level Relief and Development Organization

CASA is an autonomous relief and development organization operational in 22 states since 1947. Ever since its inception, CASA has played a pivotal role in promoting Socio-economic development and empowerment of the poor and the marginalized sections of the society. In order to facilitate well-being of the masses CASA has facilitated several processes as per the geographical location issues and needs of the area and the community. It has responded to people's need and issues through people's initiatives across the country. CASA is working on issues of strengthening local governance system, livelihood securities, disaster management, water conservation and humanitarian aid and conflict resolution through institution building and strengthening people centered advocacy, research and documentation, perspective and capacity building of different stakeholders amongst other issues. CASA is directly operational in over 100 villages of Himachal Pradesh at Kullu district and promoting the people centric development processes since long back. It is also supporting the development initiatives in all districts of Himachal Pradesh through collective action initiated by various Civil Society Organizations.

Community Managed and Owned Water Management Processes:

A Sustainable Solution to Water Crisis-

Community has played a vital role in the conservation of all natural resources since long back. Communities have the wisdom for developing their own coping mechanism for harnessing it in sustainable way and conserve it for its future generation.

There are several actors in every sectors of development and are capable to use the resources for their need and greed. It has invited the crisis of natural resource and water is going to be one of the scarce resources for the mountain people due to its use for unfair and commercial exploitation.

Water Scarcity has reached at alarming level even in the well equipped cities in Himachal due to the ignorance of community and community management processes. Therefore system and procedure should be regulated in such a way that community water management practices should get momentum and it could be institutionalized in state plan frame work.

CASA and Mountain Forum Himalayas are sensitive towards the emerging need of strengthening and institutionalization of community practices. Hence we are organizing Two days consultation on “**Redefining People’s Role in effective and Sustainable Conservation, Consumption and management of water in Himalayas**” with following objectives:-

OBJECTIVES OF THE CONSULTATION

- 1. To analyze the importance of the community owned and managed water management practices in Himalayas.**
- 2. To establish a dialogue on regular basis for strengthening and value addition in community water management practices.**
- 3. To suggest the important element for state water policy in holistic way.**
- 4. To ensure the role of local institutions in strengthening the community water management practices.**

The Consultation will be organized from 20th to 21st February’ 2007 at Health Training Centre, Parimahal, New Shimla. It would be attended by Policy Makers, Senior Govt. Officials, PRIs, CBOs, NGOs, Media and Academician. It will provide space and opportunities to State Govt. for incorporating the effective water management practices in the State Policy for Sustainable Mountain Development.