



PANDEMIC RESILIENCE IN THE WESTERN HIMALAYAS

Volume 3

of the Extraordinary Work of 'Ordinary' People:
Beyond Pandemics and Lockdowns

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Introduction

Why the Focus on the Western Himalayas?

While the Indian Himalayan region comprises 12 states, the Western Himalayas is spread across Himachal Pradesh, Uttarakhand, Ladakh, Jammu, and Kashmir. Together, the Indian Himalayas is home to 51 million people along with a diverse range of flora and fauna. The region is not only responsible for providing water to a large part of the Indian subcontinent but is also marked by towering peaks, majestic landscapes, and rich cultural heritage.

Mountains are the earliest indicators of climate change. Receding glaciers often imply an alteration in river flow and subsequent changes in biodiversity, livelihoods, and the overall well being of the population. The Himalayan states, hence, remain some of the most vulnerable regions in the world because of climate change, land degradation, overexploitation, and natural disasters.

Mountains also make it difficult for mobility to take place. Information flow is never an easy process, but the mountains make it even harder for people to receive information symmetrically. Poor Internet connection, digital gap along with the remoteness exaggerate the problem. It is said that one out of every third person in the mountains of the Global South is vulnerable to poverty, food insecurity, and isolation.

Tourism in the region was initiated after the British established 'hill stations' or 'summer resorts' like Nainital, Mussoorie, Shimla, etc which have emerged as major tourist destinations today. The region is also home to many pilgrimage sites like Badrinath, Char Dham, Kedarnath, etc. With the immense scope of tourism in the region, the questions of sustainability, carrying capacity, and eco-friendly tourism become important. There is also great concern over waste management and the increasing use of plastic as a consequence of a great number of tourists. Community-based tourism is, hence, seen as an alternative and sustainable form of tourism here where homestays can offer entrepreneurial revenues to the local communities.

Like most of India, the Himalayan region is also largely an agriculture-dependent region. However, the commercialisation of agriculture and the rising number of plantations have significantly isolated the indigenous communities from their base. Pastoralism and transhumance were historically important economic activities of the region. With the introduction of property rights and forest laws, many pastoral communities like the Van Gujjars have found themselves without voting rights or electricity, or home! Forest dependent communities continue to lose out as they are often considered 'illegal settlers' and the State and the Centre have continuously tried to 'settle them' and restrict their movements.

Challenges

The region is marked by several challenges like inaccessibility and remoteness, fragility and susceptibility to natural hazards, vulnerability to climate change, unsustainable tourism and waste management, increasing loss of biodiversity, unemployment and lack of livelihood options, massive emigration of rural youth leading to the emergence of ghost villages, and issues of food security. Recent studies have shown that the region has become more prone to natural disasters like floods, landslides, and droughts. There are also some other non-climatic issues like human-wildlife conflicts, water insecurity due to the drying up of natural springs, land degradation, and social and demographic changes. Some of the issues differ according to gender and social identity. For instance, women are often denied property rights according to traditional hill societies even when the region has been witnessing an increasing feminization of agriculture. With large-scale out-migration of the male population, most women in the region have taken to agriculture with no social, economic, or legal support.

Western Himalayan Vikalp Sangam and The Himalaya Collective

As part of the greater Vikalp Sangam, the Western Himalayan Vikalp Sangam seeks to bring together researchers, practitioners, thinkers, and others working on alternatives from not just the Himalayas but beyond to understand the region and work together for an alternative future of the mountain states. The first gathering of organizations and individuals from the region was in August 2016 in Palampur, Himachal Pradesh. The Sangam was organized by Sambhaavnaa, Jagori, Deer Park, and Kalpavriksh and hosted 25 participants from 10 organizations. The second gathering was held in the Jagori campus in Himachal in November 2018 and was hosted by Jagori Rural, People's Science Institute, Snow Leopard Conservancy - India Trust, Ladakh Arts and Media Organisation (LAMO), Sambhaavnaa, MOOL Sustainability & Research Centre, Titli Trust, Maati Collective, SADED, School for Rural Development and Environment, and Kalpavriksh.

The aim of the WHVS has been to strengthen the network of people and organizations to collaborate and work towards an alternative vision of development. The WHVS recognizes the need for an inclusive and intersectional perspective of development. There is a need to understand ecological sustainability, social well being and justice, direct and delegated democracy, economic democracy, and cultural diversity and knowledge democracy.

The Himalaya Collective emerged out of deliberations of the Western Himalayan Vikalp Sangam in 2019. It is an open-source platform for individuals and organisations living and working in the Western Himalayan region. The Collective seeks to bridge this gap of asymmetric information and aims to make information about opportunities in the mountain region easily accessible.

The Lockdown and the Lockdown Stories

When the Covid-19 pandemic hit the world, the region and its vulnerabilities were further exposed - schools and public property getting devastated by floods, migrant workers who had left started to come back leading to a trend of 'reverse migration', tourism coming to a halt, and young people losing their livelihoods. Imagine a region where most of the people's livelihood is dependent on tourism during a global pandemic where travel itself gets restricted! Tourism worldwide had the biggest loss. The Western Himalayan region, with a booming tourism industry and increasing community-based tourism, saw a devastating loss of livelihoods. But coping and resilience go on.

In this document, we have tried to compile stories of inspiration from the region which reflect perseverance, resilience, and tenacity. When a flood destroyed the only school in a village, the local residents and migrants worked together to renovate the school. When tourism came to a halt, a tourist operator started a door-to-door delivery service sustaining all its employees. Another community took to subsistence farming and focused on digital literacy. These stories show that there is hope, community work and support can overcome all hurdles.

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1. Bageshwar Story

Locals and Migrants Renovate and Digitalize Local School in Bageshwar



Photo by Adharsh Krishnan

Far from the hassles and bustles of urban city life, on the banks of the river Garur Ganga, lies the Himalayan village of Simkhet in Garur Block in Uttarakhand. According to recent research by the Indian Institute of Technology - Bombay and National Institute of Hydrology, rainfall patterns in India has been changing, owing to climate change. The Himalayan region has always been highly vulnerable to the effects of climate change and scientific analysis shows that there will be a surge in extreme rainfall and river flooding. A local flood in November last year, in 2019, washed away the Saraswati Shishu Mandir school, damaging its library and devastating four classrooms. The children continued attending the school despite its deplorable condition as they did not have any other choice. Official plans to restore the school had been made but were put on hold once the pandemic began.

Aftermath of the Pandemic

After the coronavirus outbreak and the subsequent lockdown began, the school was used as an institutional quarantine center for the migrants who had returned to their villages, working as informal workers in the cities and towns. Seeing the deplorable condition of the school, the migrants - many of whom had children studying in that school, felt uneasy thinking about the future of their children and offered to paint the school free of cost. The locals along with the migrants who had returned to the village realized they could use the lockdown period to renovate the school but there was no money or funds to do so.



Photo by Adharsh Krishnan

Two friends, Adharsh Krishnan and Pushkar Bisht, who have been working in the development sector in Uttarakhand for some time now, decided to help the locals renovate the school. Adharsh is the founder of AVDAZ which works with small and marginal farmers while Pushkar, a local himself whose ancestors had donated land for the school back in 1995, is a part of the Bhartiya Agro-Industrial Foundation. They saw that it was not just flood-related destruction that the school needed to heal from, but the lack of basic infrastructure was also astonishing. “After the 2019 flood, the entire school was filled with garbage and other waste. The building was completely damaged,” said Pushkar.

“The teachers did not even have chairs to sit on in the school,” said Adharsh. While the migrant labour began renovations while living on the school premises, bringing in infrastructure and digitalizing the school were the other goals Krishnan and Bisht were aiming for.

“There is no school providing computer education in the 20-25 kilometer radius,” said Adharsh. “Education and sports are two sectors with immense scope for future growth”. The children would mostly play games like kho-kho since there was no sports equipment for them to play other sports. Good work, however well-intentioned, comes at a cost - it would cost Rupees 4 Lakh to carry out all the renovation work. After trying to reach out to the government with no help in regard to the funds, the duo set up a crowdfunding page

on Milaap and raised a respectable amount from donors from India as well as foreign countries, though short of the initial budget. The work began, the locals and the migrants would show up enthusiastically and have completed the entire renovation.

Every day a new batch of workers would come to renovate the school, there were no fixed workers or a fixed time. The workers belonged to all castes and worked together for a better future for their children. The work was completely carried out with self-determination and self-motivation. Almost all of the workers were agriculture dependent and saw the school as the future of their children. The school was also provided with computers, a projector, printer, almirah, sports equipment, and a whiteboard with the aim of digitalizing the school from the amount that they raised.

Lesson

The lockdown was a tough time for the migrants and the Himalayan region saw an immense rise in reverse migration. The plight of the only school in the area forced the locals to renovate the school. Technological and entrepreneurial knowledge helped the community to crowdfund the amount to rebuild and digitalize the school. When everything seemed dismal because of the pandemic, the renovation of the school and promoting computer education can be seen as a positive community change.



Photo by Adharsh Krishnan

2. Mahila Umang Samiti in Uttarakhand

Women of Mahila Umang Samiti in Uttarakhand Lead the Way



Photo by Kalyan Paul

The fragile and vulnerable Himalayan ecosystem has over the years seen a negative impact on sustainable mountain farming systems. This has resulted in declining food security and an increasing out-migration of males and youths from the region. A new trend of ‘feminization of agriculture’ has swept over the region with more and more women joining agriculture. Mahila Umang Samiti, a collective of several self-help groups (SHGs), was formed as an attempt to cover the interests of such women farmers or women involved in various viable business activities to become financially sustainable. The idea was to encourage saving and enhance accessibility to financial services to women otherwise excluded from or unaware of the traditional banking system. Started in December 1999, Umang covers women from 100 villages in Nainital, Almora, and Bageshwar.

Aftermath of the Pandemic

When the lockdown started, the Umang women began their conversations about how to tackle the pandemic. They had over the years saved money for a difficult time out of which 10-12 lakh would be distributed among the women every year. “We knew that there won’t be a more difficult time than this”, said Suneeta Kashyap, a member of Umang. A consensus was reached that they would distribute a part of their savings - 60 lakh rupees among 850 people to get through the pandemic together.

The start of the rabi season also meant crops for the market. But the only problem was there was no market because of the lockdown. There were also questions about



Photo by Suneeta Kashyap

the procurement process of the crops. The women farmers contacted the local markets; called and e-mailed them to help them sell their crops. Around 419 farmers decided to cooperate and a total of 12.5 lakh agricultural product was procured from them. The women researched the areas that have a scarcity of certain food items and realized different areas had different needs - some areas needed garlic, some needed rajma. With all the marketing channels being closed and a positive response from the local markets, the women decided to start a door-to-door delivery of their products.

Home delivery of their products has been an efficient model for the Umang women. They have started a website for online delivery as well, which has received a positive response so far.

Lesson

Increasing women's participation in matters of finance and decision-making is an effective measure of not just empowerment but also has other long-term benefits. Enhancement of the capacity of women in money management and saving also yields crucial results. The role of technology and digital literacy of women is also important.

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Photo by Anand Adhikari

3. Nature Guide Program

Learning Goes on in the Pandemic: Young Nature Guides of Uttarakhand



Photo by Kesar Singh

With declining agricultural productivity along with deforestation, the largely agrarian and forest-dependent communities of the Himalayas are being pushed away from their traditional livelihoods. As a result, out-migration and poverty have accelerated in the region. The Nature Guide Program, supported by Titli Trust and the Center for Ecology Development and Research (CEDAR), was initiated as a nature-linked rural livelihood program in three landscapes of Uttarakhand: Mussoorie-Benog, Jhilmil Jheel-Thano, and Mukteshwar beginning in October 2019. The program aims to create capable and dedicated nature guides in the three village clusters of Uttarakhand by encouraging nature-based ecotourism as an ecologically and economically sustainable livelihood among communities.

The trainees largely hail from families that see nature-linked guiding as an opportunity to supplement their incomes from agricultural and non-agricultural activities. Most of them are engaged in farming or in other non-farm sectors like transportation and hospitality and are highly enthused by the nature-linked livelihood opportunities Uttarakhand has to offer. Prior to the pandemic, each practice session generally comprised 3-4 hours of field training, taking place every 2-3 weeks. The field training includes bird identification and other natural history issues. The trainees were also taught how to use guide books for plant and animal identification.

Prior to the pandemic, the nature guides went through an orientation from October 2019. The residential training workshop and the training programs were in motion till March 2020 before the pandemic transformed human relationships with nature.



Photo by Kesar Singh

Aftermath of the Pandemic

When the pandemic started, like everything else, tourists stopped coming by mid-March. The Nature Guide Program, however, did not come to a halt. The initial 3 months of the lockdown saw no practice session or field training. However, training and learning about nature continued. Although the participants could not physically meet from mid-March to June, the virtual training still went on. Through innovation and creativity, nature-learning became possible even when a physical meeting was not possible!

“Earlier, we used to focus on birds, but now with changing times, we have shifted the focus to flora as well as butterflies,” says Kesar Singh who has been associated with the Nature Guide Program since 2014-15. Kesar Singh and Taukeer Alam Lodha, who are based in the Mussoorie and Jhilmil landscapes respectively, have both played a significant role in handling and continuing the program amidst the lockdown. Both Singh and Taukeer are locals but have effectively disseminated their knowledge, kept the program running, and have acted as resource people. They have been able to maintain constant communication with the participants through their WhatsApp groups. “Even though we have not been able to meet physically, our learning continued. Sometimes, I would click photos with my camera and post them in the group, sometimes I would download them from the Internet. But the process did not come to a halt,” Kesar Singh further adds.

The trainees were also asked to post birdlists based on backyard bird counts and post pictures of birds, plants, and butterflies observed by them in their villages. The virtual WhatsApp community was engaged in quizzes on bird identification, butterflies, and tree phenology.

Lesson

Nature-based livelihoods can be explored even in a virtual form. Local knowledge and creativity with adequate technology and access to the Internet are important for this.

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4. Overland Escape

Tourist Company Turns into a Door-to-Door Delivery Service in Ladakh



Photo by Tundup Dorje

Overland Escape was founded by Tundup Dorje aiming at domestic tourists and was one of the first tourist companies in Ladakh targeting domestic tourists rather than foreign tourists. Recognizing the absence of newspapers in the region, the group also started a not-for-profit newspaper called Reach Ladakh bulletin and have been printing it for the last 8 years. The salary of the newspaper staff is paid from the profit from Overland Escape. Close to 45 people are directly provided employment by both the tourist agency and the newspaper, and close to 150 people are indirectly employed by the agency. When the pandemic hit, the agency suffered heavy loss as a large amount of money was invested in airline packages which never got refunded but were asked to utilize the money for future bookings. This will roughly take another two years to get a complete return of the money. Tourism is one of the largest industries in Ladakh and this did not happen in a day. It took years for Ladakh to reach where it is today.

Aftermath of the Pandemic

The Covid-19 pandemic has completely devastated the tourism sector and thousands of people who were only dependent on tourism have lost their livelihood. This is especially true for regions like Ladakh which had seen a boom in tourism in recent years. The pandemic has left many people dependent on tourism jobless. Overland Escape, too, soon realized it could not sustain itself and its employees.



Photos by Tundup Dorje

“Who knows how many years it will take for us to reach where we were before the pandemic started?”, said Mr. Dorje. He was aware of the uncertainties of the employees of both Overland Escape and Reach Ladakh, most of who did not have any alternate source of livelihood. “I could have told them this is it, we have no business, I cannot pay you right now”, Mr. Dorje recalled, “But they had no other alternatives. We had to think of something else.”

Word had come from the District Magistrate and Hill Council of Ladakh that vegetables and medicines from Delhi needed to be distributed. Dorje realized that he had the manpower and vehicles to do the distribution. “We did not have the money, but we had the manpower”, says Mr. Dorje. Soon, the phone would not stop ringing and the distribution business started to flourish. Ladakh is almost an unexplored market for delivery services. Because of its remoteness and hilly terrain, the region lacks door-to-door delivery services and the pandemic showed the importance of such a business.

Capitalizing on this, Dorje and his team started off by delivering vegetable supplies from Punjab and Delhi. They called their door-to-door distribution service Gortsa, got it registered, and have made a website for the service. With a commission from the grocery shops, the business has been able to sustain all 45 of its employees.

Lesson

Tourism has been one of the biggest hit sectors during the pandemic. However, the manpower, skills, and technology used in the sector can bring up novel ideas of sustenance. Innovative and small-scale distribution services can offer a viable source of livelihood. The use of digital technologies and the internet for marketing and communication is also effective.

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5. People of Munsiari

The People of Munsiari Show What Resilience Is



Photo by Beena Nitwal

The Maati Sangathan is a women’s collective based in Gori valley, Munsiari in Pithoragarh district of Uttarakhand. Maati is an autonomous collective of women farmers, weavers, milk producers, vegetable vendors, and self-employed entrepreneurs. The community here is largely dependent on agriculture, in addition to tourism. The origin of Maati is deeply political in the sense that it emerged as a resistance of village women against patriarchal issues like violence against women- be it domestic, sexual, or caste-based, women’s unequal ownership of land and other productive resources, of issues related to Jal, Jungle, and Zameen. Maati’s mandate goes beyond the individual and is active in enabling women’s agency through active participation in local self-governance and in determining a people-centric development agenda that is ecologically sound in the Himalayan context. The polity is embedded in the mountain village economy and Maati’s engagement with it is direct and pragmatic. Members of Maati are also a part of the Himalayan Ark, which was set up in 2004 and was registered as a company in 2016. Himalayan Ark provides culturally immersive experiences to tourists through the homestay. Founded as a nature and community-based tourism enterprise Himalayan Ark contributes actively to the conservation and well-being of local forests and provides an additional source of income for women.

Aftermath of the Pandemic

The pandemic-induced lockdown has been a huge blow to tourism around the world. For the tourism-dependent Munsiari community, it was no different. The community



Photo by Beena Nitwal

saw a fall in their income because of the lockdown. “It is important to differentiate between the lockdown and the pandemic”, says Malika Virdi who had started Maati years ago, “The pandemic is still going on, but it was the lockdown which affected us.” Virdi is also the founder-director of Himalayan Ark, one of the co-founders of Voices of Rural India, and is currently in her second term as the Sarpanch of the Sarmoli Jainti Van Panchayat.

To cope with the lockdown as well as the drop in incomes, the community started a platform called Voices of Rural India in collaboration with five other organizations across India. Symbolizing the freedom of rural voices, Voices of Rural India was launched on Independence Day as a platform for community-based homestay owners to share their stories and make an earning, however small. By publishing their stories here, homestay owners earn Rs 1000 for their first story and Rs1500 for a second story, and Rs 2000 for a third, thereby incentivizing consistent rural journalism. But more than the monetary compensation, Voices of Rural India envisions upskilling digital literacy of men and women in the rural areas. Every participating organization needs to have 5 stories every month and the editors and organizations work on a voluntary basis.

“Villages have potential but they do not have the tools”, says Ms. Virdi, who hopes that people from rural areas can come on par with urban people in terms of digital exposure and infrastructure.

She recognizes the digital gap and the community has set up a digital centre to counter this gap. “When the schools had to shut down, all classes were conducted online,” says Kanchan Arya, member of Maati, “But many children did not have mobile phones or computers. So we got 4 computers and 1 mobile phone, bought a printer and started online classes in our digital centre.”

In addition to dealing with the immediate impact on tourism-related incomes and digital education, the community also strengthened local agriculture by collectivising it. While there has been a growing dependence on the market for food supplies, Maati had consistently kept food sovereignty as a central concern with a focus on local food production which helped the people survive despite the fall in tourism-related income. Food production and soil fertility are dependent on nutrient cycling from the surrounding forest and the lockdown led to a reaffirmation of the

importance of Van Panchayats in mountain agriculture and survival. “We have set up a collective of farmers who have small landholdings so that we can support each other”, says Kamla Pandey. People who were farming separately are now coming together to support each other and grow crops for themselves rather than for the market. They provide each other with seeds and manure. With an increased focus on agriculture, the community has been successful in coping with the crisis. With the sudden seizure of sale of local food products and handicrafts to visiting tourists, Maati shifted to selling local products like herbs, food items, and woolen products through their own Instagram page, which they picked up the use of during the pandemic.

Lesson

Knowledge of local agro-ecological conditions is critical to the survival of rural mountain communities. Collective farming and locally managed agriculture have helped communities cope with the crisis. The pandemic has made everyone realize the importance of digital literacy. Rural communities tend to lack digital infrastructure but not potential. Overcoming the digital gap can strengthen rural voices. The tourism industry has experienced a downturn but alternatives can sustain tourist-dependent communities through digital empowerment, strengthening of local agriculture, and a greater focus on natural resources and common forests. Localization and subsistence agriculture have reflected the ability to contend with a skewed and fickle market.

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Photo by Beena Nitwal

6. People of Spiti

The People of Spiti Take to Self-Governance to Cope with the Pandemic



Photo by Sonam Targey, member of CPMSD

Located high in the Himalayas in north-eastern Himachal Pradesh, Spiti is home to many tribal populations engaged in agrarian or tourism-related livelihoods. Over recent years, the indigenous agrarian population of Spiti has been growing cash crops to sustain themselves. Cash crop cultivation is highly market-based and entails necessary exposure to the outside world. Tourism-based livelihoods, which are also common in the region, also require interaction across borders. However, with the advent of the pandemic, the entire community began a self-imposed lockdown which made way for changing not only farming patterns but livelihoods and lifestyles.

Aftermath of the Pandemic

At first, when the pandemic hit, the remoteness and inaccessibility of Spiti exacerbated the vulnerability of the local population because of meager resources and underdeveloped infrastructure. The locals quickly realized that the guidelines, rules, and policies applicable to the rest of the country would not be sufficient in the region.

This called for alternative measures for dealing with health, livelihood, food security, and the overall wellbeing of the natives. Realizing the need for an alternative system, the locals resorted to self-governance and community leadership to tackle the impacts of the pandemic.

The first step towards local self-governance was the formation of an informal governing body called the Committee for Preventive Measures and Sustainable Development (CPMSD), a citizen-driven, self-organized, and voluntary group which would work in parallel with existing government structures. The Committee worked in two layers - the larger Committee comprised of different stakeholders such as representatives of the local panchayat, pradhans, women's groups (mahila mandals), youth groups (yuvak mandals), traders groups, representatives of the Spiti Hoteliers Association, homestays, taxi unions, voluntary organizations, and Lamas of 5 major Gonpas (religious institutions) including Kee, Komic, Dhankar, Tabo and Kungri monasteries. The members of this larger Committee selected 12 members to form an Expert Committee Group to make decision making, leadership, and implementation easier on the ground.

Under the leadership of the Committee, the local tribal population unanimously decided to opt for a Pan-Spiti self-initiated isolation and movement restriction weeks before the first nationwide lockdown was announced.

The implementation of this self-initiated lockdown was carried out in a decentralized manner. All the various stakeholders participated actively and helped spread information about the lockdown in all villages. All non-essential services like some businesses and tourism activities in the region were subsequently shut down. Since this process began in mid-March while some international and domestic tourists were still in the valley, the Committee also assisted in their safe return to their home destinations. The locals volunteered and self-patrolled the entry points of Spiti which went on for 7 months - from April to October 2020.

The largely agriculture-based community of Spiti is normally dependent on cash crops like green peas, which serve as a major source of livelihood. The production of cash crops is highly labour intensive and heavily dependent on external supply chains for transportation and sales. Carrying on with cash crop production during the lockdown would have meant exposing the entire community to risks of infection. With this in mind, the locals decided to alter their farming practices and shift the focus to self-sustenance.



Photo by Sonam Targey, member of CPMSD

Instead, many farmers in different villages began to sow traditional crops like kala matar and barley instead of green peas, which are also more suited to the region's geo-climatic conditions while being more drought resistant. "This has been one of the monumental changes in our farming practices this year as we saw a revival of traditional crops. In Kaza, which is one of the largest villages here, almost no one sowed green peas this year due to our collective decision" adds Dolker, one of the representatives of the local Mahila Mandal.

In the future, the committee envisions taking up issues beyond the pandemic and carrying on their work for the long term. They also endeavor to take up interrelated socio-economic issues, development issues like health, education, livelihood, and other civil matters even after the pandemic. "We intend to carry our work beyond the pandemic and continue to perform our duties parallel to existing structures," Sonam Targey, one of the representatives of the committee CPMSD, says, "Locals have put immense faith in the committee's work and this need to sustain for future too."

Lesson

Self and local governance along with decentralization can be effective in coping with systemic challenges such as pandemics and lockdowns. Local communities with the use of traditional knowledge and decentralised decision-making can prove to be an effective resistance method. Traditional agricultural practices and not necessarily a market-based system can lead to self-sustenance.

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Photo by Sonam Targey, member of CPMSD

7. People's Science Institute

Women Revive Springs in Uttarakhand



Photo by Bhagwati Pandey, PSI

The People's Science Institute (PSI), a non-profit research and development organization, has worked extensively in community-led watershed-based livelihoods development, environmental quality monitoring, disaster-safe housing, and dissemination of appropriate technologies. It is spread across the country with a special focus on the Himalayan states of Uttarakhand and Himachal Pradesh. PSI's mission is to help eradicate poverty through the empowerment of the poor and the productive, sustainable, and equitable use of available human and natural resources. To achieve this goal, it provides technical and managerial support to communities and organizations, implements development programs, and undertakes public interest research and policy analysis.

Aftermath of Pandemic

When the inception of the lockdown, the organization immediately started its relief work. Essentials like wheat flour, rice, oil, pulses, soap, detergent, sanitary pads, tea leaves, etc were distributed in 70 villages and 10 urban slum habitations in Bageshwar, Dehradun, Pauri, Rudraprayag, Nainital, Almora, Pithoragarh in Uttarakhand, and Solan in Himachal Pradesh. It also provided quarantine support to migrant laborers. It actively took part in producing sanitizers in its own laboratory which were distributed along with masks in remote villages of the Himalayas. The organization was also successful in generating awareness about the pandemic and self-distancing norms among agricultural families and migrant laborers.



Photo by Bhagwati Pandey, PSI

The organization was also successful in carrying out midterm support to the livelihood of the people affected in the target areas. COVID-19 has tremendously affected the agriculture sector of the Himalayan states. An immediate rapid assessment by the PSI team made them realize that agricultural activities, especially threshing, were hampered after the recent harvest of rabi crops due to the lack of availability of machines and transportation. Keeping this in mind, the PSI team intervened by providing post-harvest support like threshing and marketing to support around 300 families. The availability of seeds was ensured for the Kharif season in Rudraprayag and Bageshwar districts in Uttarakhand. Around 3 quintals of seeds for pulses, maize and paddy were arranged.

However, the most inspiring part of PSI's work has been in handling the water crisis in Uttarakhand which did not stop even during the pandemic. With data from Spring Atlas published by NITI Aayog and Acquadam, PSI gathers its information about target areas. The main areas of work are Pauri, Garhwal, Nainital, Pithoragarh, and Almora. The role of communities is particularly important here as it is the community that provides data on areas that need revival. The focus is on both the quality as well as quantity of the water. The next step is a simultaneous hydrological and socio-economic survey leading to the finalization of the critical springs.

This is where community mobilization starts. With street theatres, folk songs in local languages, and awareness, the locals are asked if they agree that the springs need to be revitalized to reduce water scarcity. Water User Groups are formed comprising of both men and women. They are trained to take care of the springs. The idea is to provide income to both men and women and push them towards decision-making. While trained geologists, engineers, and social scientists design the structure and recharge area of the spring and decide the treatment measures to be taken according to the ecosystem, the community is equally involved in the decision making, builds the springs, and looks over the maintenance.

The pandemic made it difficult for the training to go on during the monsoon - the most important time period for the spring recharge. But virtual training on WhatsApp and Zoom continued the spring recharge. The technicalities of the spring recharge usually taken care of by trained engineers, geologists, and social scientists were also

taught to the community paraworkers using technology as simple as videos and photographs. This led to the building of capacity as well as confidence among the community members, especially the women paraworkers. It is noteworthy that most of these technicalities and trench layouts are either male or expert dominated spaces. Through technology and novel modes of communication, it has been possible to transfer knowledge to the rural communities and women paraworkers at a time as devastating as this. Women have been more vulnerable to the pandemic, with more women losing out jobs as compared to men and more women lacking access to virtual learning. Women engaging in a male-dominated technical sphere only through virtual training is indeed remarkable.

Lesson

Training and even virtual training has developed a different kind of confidence, capacity, and skills among community members, which has led to the revival of springs solely by the community, and water scarcity was successfully avoided. Through virtual training, women can successfully engage in the male-dominated technical sphere, leading to a rise in their confidence.

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Photo by Bhagwati Pandey, PSI

8. Snow Leopard Conservancy Support in the Villages of Meru and Hanupatta

Local Women and Return Migrants in Ladakh tend to a Sustainable Living



Photo by Sangay Bhutia

Snow Leopard Conservancy - India Trust (SLC-IT) (<http://snowleopardindia.org/>) is an organization working to better understand and protect the Snow Leopard (*Panthera uncia*), a large cat native to the rugged slopes of the High Himalaya in Central and South Asia. Founded in 2009, SLC-IT has been working with a community-based conservation approach and is active in the region of Ladakh.

Every year, SLC-IT provides training to the women of many villages of Ladakh including Hanupatta, Meru, Himya, and Lamayuru villages in handicraft and handloom activities. These training programmes are meant to empower the village women and provide them with a source of income. Local communities are trained to promote their traditional arts and crafts and the income from the sale of these handicrafts helps in offsetting the loss of livestock to snow leopards.

Aftermath of the Pandemic

The Covid-19 lockdown this year forced the organization to cancel the training initially. But the women of these villages reached out to SLC and asked them to train them in dry needle felting - something which they had never done before. Dry needle felting is a form of craft that requires a needle and wool to create 3D objects.

Photo by Jigmet Dadyl



The women wanted to do something productive during the lockdown and sell their products during the next tourist session. The women’s enthusiasm motivated SLC to initiate the training amidst the lockdown. With extra care and precautions, the training was successfully conducted.

Surprisingly, more women attended the training this year than the average over pre-Covid years. In addition to women, migrant youth who had returned because of the lockdown also participated.

As the lockdown restricted travel to Leh or other closeby markets, the women were able to procure the raw materials required for dry needle felting, such as wool, from their homes and from local sheep and domestic yaks. The women were not dependent on the market for any raw materials, and they could get all they needed for the craft from their homes without going out to buy anything from the market.



Photo by Anzara Anjum

In recent years, Ladakh has seen a rise in the role of the market with an increasing dependence on it. One of the immediate implications of the lockdown was the supply cut of vegetables. The lockdown was an eye-opener in many ways, with a growing recognition that the mountains themselves are a source of various edible roots, herbs, fruits, and vegetables. In addition to the training on dry needle felting, women from the Himya village were told

about mountain herbs as an alternative to commercial vegetables. The women were also guided to collect vegetables and herbs from the mountains. The women could sustain their families with very minimal costs in a healthier and more sustainable way.

Lessons

Planning is bringing the future into the present so that we can do something about it. The women of these villages have used their time in the lockdown to produce material that they can sell in the next tourist season. With no external inputs, the women have used local knowledge and agro-ecological conditions to sustain themselves.

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9. Adolescent Girls in Kanga

The Tale of the Adolescent Girls of Kanga During the Pandemic



Photo by Jagori Grameen

The Covid-19 pandemic has made it evident that certain groups of people are more and economically vulnerable than others. Its consequences have been felt unevenly based on our identities of caste, class, gender, etc. The case of adolescent girls is very interesting in this regard. They already face a lot of barriers in terms of health. Deficiency of iron and malnutrition is higher in girls as compared to boys. Young girls and women already stand at the margins, and their adverse plight is further aggravated due to the crisis where they stand at the risk of losing a lot. There is also the possibility of losing all progress made on girls' rights so far in the name of issues that are 'more urgent'. The risk to their well-being, security, and peer support can already be felt.

The Jagori Rural Charitable Trust (JRCT) works with communities of Kangra district of Himachal to address all forms of discrimination based on gender, class, caste, religion, disability, and all other forms of social exclusion. As part of the Aware Adolescent Girls Action for Justice (AAGAJ) program, the organization recognizes that adolescent girls are one of the most vulnerable groups which are impacted due to the corona crisis. As the lockdown started, the organization made efforts to reach out to them in four blocks of Kanga district, namely Rait, Nagrota Surian, Dharamshala, and Kangra.

Aftermath of the Pandemic

Young girls tend to find a lot of support in their friends, peer groups, and collectives. However, the lockdown rendered most of them isolated. Many reports of young women facing high risks of sexual abuse within locked down households and deserted

streets with their abusers started coming out. The lockdown period witnessed a surge in distress calls of girls, children, and women due to violence. Childline India received as many as 92,000 distress calls in 11 days in the month of April!

With a fall in household income, young girls became more vulnerable to dropping out of school and colleges which will further widen the gender divide in education. There is also a gendered aspect of the digital divide. Girls are less likely to own smartphones or have access to the Internet. The situation was no different in Kangra. The lockdown also meant an increase in the household responsibility of girls along with harvesting duties, making it harder for girl students. Stress at home and lack of space have also affected the girls, making it difficult to cope with their studies. The chances of early or child marriage of young girls have also increased with the lockdown as online education has become more challenging. Physical and mental health issues have also become prominent among young girls. While the majority of young girls and women are anemic, their access to nutrition is only going to worsen with mitigating household incomes and falling standards of living.

“I have completed my 12th exam. I wanted to study further but college is far off from my village,” Vandana, a young adult from the region says, “If I were a boy, my parents might have allowed me for higher study. I was pushing them to get me admitted this year, but now due to the pandemic, it seems that I am never going to college.”

Shikha, a 15-year-old girl says, “Studying at home has become really challenging. I have two younger siblings. I help them in their studies during the day and have to do all the household chores. There is a lot of agricultural work to do as well. So, I only get to study at night after 9 pm sometimes when all work is done”.

The lockdown has also disrupted the production and supply of menstrual products. “We used to wash our sanitary cloth in a stream near our house earlier,” says Jyoti, “Now that everyone is in the village because of the lockdown, there are always people around that stream, making it difficult for us to go there and take bath and wash our clothes, especially menstrual cloth. I feel scared to wash the menstrual cloth when people are there so I have to wake up early and take a bath before 5 in the morning.”



Photo by Jagori Grameen

Jagori has tried to respond to the nutritional needs of these adolescent girls. The organization developed nutrition kits along with sanitary napkin packets to address the nutritional needs and menstrual challenges of young girls. Each kit contains a letter addressed to the girls and a pamphlet containing essential helpline numbers for them to contact in case of domestic abuse. A total of 780 nutrition packets and sanitary pads were given to adolescent girls. The girls were also made aware of mental and physical well-being along and domestic abuse.

Lesson and Way Ahead

The question of young girls cannot be separated from the larger crisis but demands a deeper understanding of their vulnerability. The crisis, like for others, has magnified the struggles for girls both in their personal and social space. The problem of patriarchy within households is at the heart of most issues that challenged adolescent girls whether it's the lack of nutrition, the access to education, or the violence in homes. As we move along, it is important to build and center our responses on adolescent girls and understand their needs which are at the intersection of them being girls, children, and young adults.

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Photo by Jagori Grameen

10. Birds of Kashmir as an Eco-tourism and Livelihood Generating Alternative

Birds of Kashmir Lead the Way for Eco-tourism and Livelihood Generation



Photo by Irfan Jeelani

Birding and avi-tourism in recent years have emerged as alternatives to commercial tourism. The United Nations environment agency has recognized the significant role of birding in the tourism industry along with its various direct and indirect economic benefits for local communities of developing countries. Kashmir has a huge potential for such a community and eco-friendly tourist industry and the lockdown saw a beginning in this direction. Salim Ali, India's most famous ornithologist once called Kashmir a "heaven on Earth for migratory birds". Every year, over a million migratory birds use the wetlands in Kashmir as transitory camps.

The Birds of Kashmir was founded by Irfan Jeelani during the lockdown with the aim to attract birdwatchers and familiarize avifauna with the other tourists. The idea was also to generate livelihood in an eco-friendly and sustainable way.

Jeelani, a 32-year old bird enthusiast from the small town of Kangan in Ganderbani district from Kashmir, was always interested in trekking and has gone on trekking expeditions with various trekking groups in Kashmir. "While trekking, I used to observe nature and click pictures," he says, "clicking pictures of birds became my passion, I started to read about the flora and fauna but was disheartened when I found there has not been much research done on birds by locals. Whatever research is available has all been done by foreigners."



Photo by Irfan Jeelani

Jeelani started by posting pictures on social media. He photographed 243 different bird species in the Kashmir valley which caught the attention of many prominent national & international birders. Among them was Sarwan Deep Singh, with whom Jeelani later worked and learned different techniques.

Aftermath of the Pandemic

When the pandemic hit, everyone was forced to stay indoors. The lockdown was a difficult time for the tourism sector as well as for communities dependent on such ventures. The youth became uncertain about their future and unemployment peaked. It was then when Jeelani started a concept called “Birding from Balcony or Birding from Backyard”. “My aim was to draw the viewer in and acquaint them with the avifauna of the region,” he says, “this will also give them a wonderful opportunity to click something different and post it on our social media portal.” This concept eventually got evolved into a club - the Birds of Kashmir (BOK).

Jeelani does not want to limit the group to only Kashmir unlike many other such groups with lesser participation. His idea was to create a broad group that will also act as a platform for the youth to showcase their work and guide them to become successful professionals in the area. Which he succeeded in doing. Birds of Kashmir today has four thousand active members from different countries.

As BOK expanded, Jeelani started to get calls from different bird enthusiasts for bird touring. Jeelani saw this as an opportunity for generating a source of sustainable income for the youth of the region. Jeelani works with 30-40 youth and trains them personally to guide bird enthusiasts and other tourists. The youth are then paid by the tourist groups.

“Kashmir is marked by a rich biodiversity including a large number of bird species, many of which are unique to Kashmir,” Jeelani says, “and after BOK expanded, we have started getting several requests for birding tours and nature tours which is has emerged as a concept in Europe. We have subsequently started some eco-friendly tours where we are directly taking the birders to their desired destination. This has becomes a source of income generation to the people of that area.”

Despite the sustainability of this income generation, BOK has kept the number of visitors to a limited number because of the pandemic. This can later be expanded to generate more environmentally sustainable employment.

Lesson

Sustainable employment and income generation is possible despite the difficulties of the pandemic. Local youth and communities can harness their local knowledge and through this knowledge transfer, community and eco-tourism can be encouraged keeping in mind the carrying capacity.



Photo by Irfan Jeelani

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