



**The Kailash Sacred Landscape Conservation  
Initiative: Assessment and Potential of  
Cooperation in the Himalayas**

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# The Kailash Sacred Landscape Conservation Initiative: Assessment and Potential of Cooperation in the Himalayas

## Abstract

*The monolithic understanding of geopolitics has long relegated the increasing concerns of climatic change and the degradation of biodiversity outside the realm of geo-politics. But the spatial and temporal permeability of environmental impacts have pushed new global instruments such as Transboundary Conservation Governance to address issues of biodiversity and development together in an ecological setting across political borders. Kailash Sacred Landscape Conservation and Development Initiative (KSLCDI) is such a ‘South-South Cooperation’, signed in 2011 among China, India and Nepal, covering western portion of Tibet Autonomous Region of China (TAR), northern eastern part of Uttarakhand, India, and adjacent districts in Nepal’s far western region of Nepal. The involvement of wide range of actors (state/non-state) and various levels (regional/state/local) in such governance has bestowed critical procedural issues related to state sovereignty and borders, centralized and decentralized regulatory frameworks and balancing of economic gains with cultural values. Taking into consideration such experiences, this paper attempts to analyze the ‘transboundaryness’ of the Initiative with reference to state and non-state level interactions among the participant states, and its ‘groundedness’ in terms of the centrality (or otherwise) of local communities as major beneficiaries/participants in its policy of community based resource management.*

**Keywords: Himalayas, Transboundary Conservation, KSLCDI, China-India-Nepal, Community Based Resource Management**

South Asia’s land borders have had a troubled legacy from the British colonial era. But the concerns of climate change and the protection of bio-diversity have recently put to test the contentious geopolitical understanding of the region’s borderlands to reconstitute the borderlands of China, India and Nepal as an ecological landscape. The exacerbation of issues of environmental degradation and their extensive spatial and temporal consequences beyond national borders have pushed for a new global instrument of trans-boundary ecological conservation governance in the Himalayas. This study deals with one such regional project, i.e., the Kailash Sacred Landscape Conservation and Development Initiative (KSLCDI), involving the governments of China, India and Nepal. Focusing on the ecological landscape/borderland overlapping existing national boundaries, the KSLCDI seeks to ensure sustainability in the nature-human relationship in this border region of South Asia.

In environmental discourse, trans-border conservation has been labelled variously in different contexts as ‘International Peace Park’, ‘Trans-frontier Protected Areas’, ‘Trans-boundary Natural Resource Management Area’, etc., often resulting

in confusion about their aims and objectives (Vasilijevic 2012; Zbicz 2003). Under the theme, 'Benefits Beyond Boundaries', the landmark 2003 World Parks Congress described trans-boundary conservation efforts as a new frontier in conservation and development practices that will enable the achievement of biodiversity, socioeconomic, and peace and security goals (Fall 2011). In realisation of this goal, government and non-government international organizations play a crucial role in imagining and assisting new partnerships between states, regional institutions, international development organisations, aid agencies and the private sector.

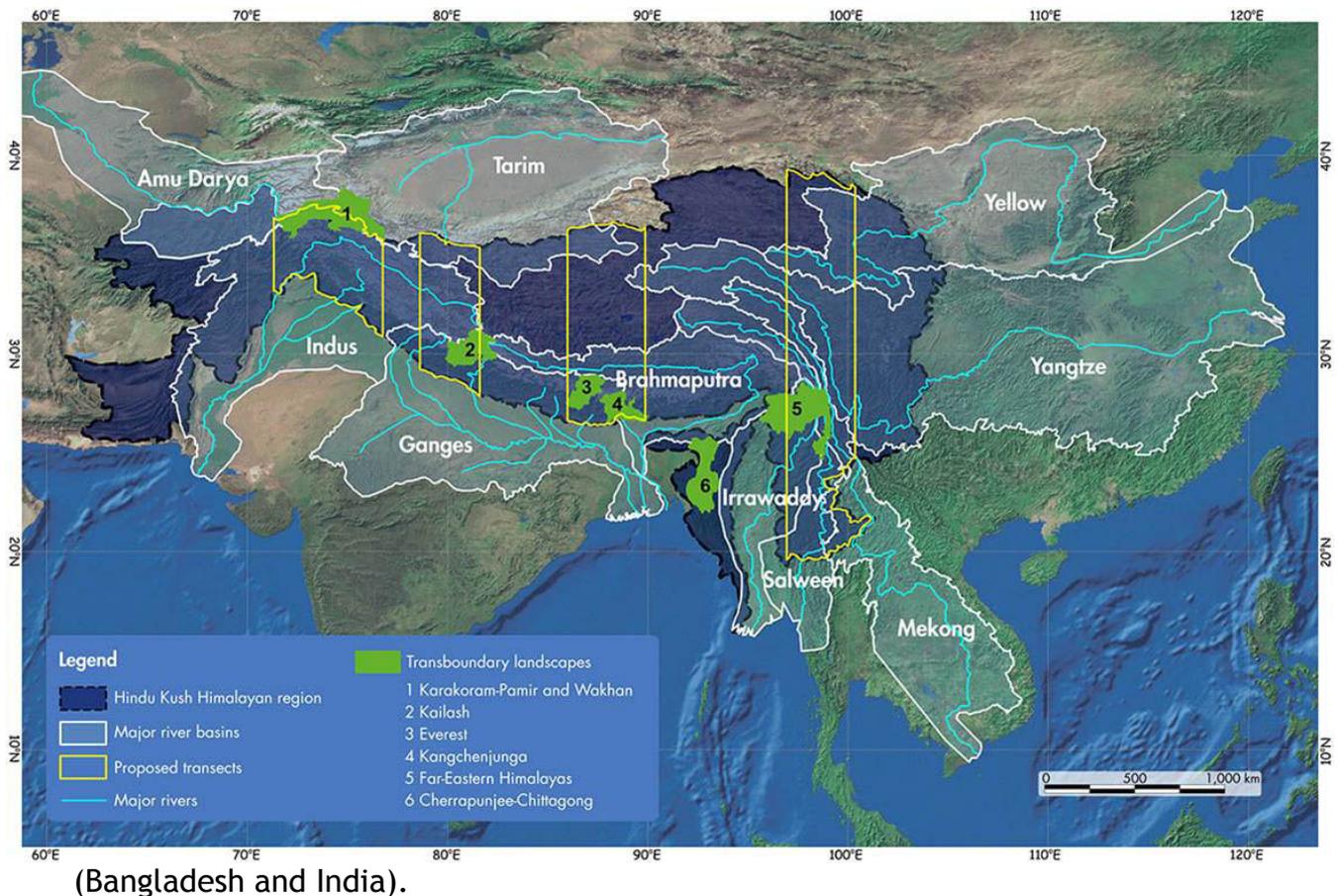
However, while on one hand a trans-boundary vision of conservation has widespread acceptance across many regions of the world, at the same time its implementation in the developing countries of Southern Africa and Latin America has raised questions on its effectiveness (Bocchino 2014; Duffy 2005). The involvement of multiple actors at multiple levels of trans-boundary conservation governance often raises critical procedural issues related to state sovereignty and borders, centralized or decentralized regulatory frameworks, knowledge preferences (modern scientific or indigenous), and the balancing of economic gains with the preservation of cultural integrity. Taking into consideration these experiences, this case study of KSLCDI attempts to understand the role of states in relation to local and global non-state actors around a natural and culturally constructed landscape. The paper analyzes the 'transboundaryness' of the Initiative with reference to state and non-state level interactions among the participant states, and its 'groundedness' in terms of the centrality (or otherwise) of local communities as major beneficiaries/participants in policies of eco-tourism. It thus explores the challenges of achieving a common goal in a geopolitically active arena.

### **A Trans-Boundary Conservation Initiative in the Himalayas: The First of its Kind**

The Hindu-Kush Himalayan region is home to extremely heterogeneous and valued flora and fauna, wild life sanctuaries and watersheds, as well as numerous cultural heritage sites. The local demography of the region also includes indigenous tribes and nomads who derive their social and economic status from these natural resources. It is thus strongly influenced by both human and climatic forces (Oli et al. 2013). In brainstorming sessions of the Initiative's preparatory phase, partner institutions came to a consensual conclusion that the region, in the past few years, has experienced the challenges to the natural and cultural landscape of 'rapid population growth, urbanization, tourism, subsistence activities and of improved accessibility' (ICIMOD 2009) leading to deterioration of habitat and biodiversity loss.

These changes in the mountainous region drew the attention of the institutionalized regional learning and knowledge sharing centre,- the International Centre for Integrated Mountain Development (ICIMOD), which endeavoured to provide a forum for state players to attain sustainable and resilient mountain development with the available regional opportunities and mechanisms. Under the umbrella of 'Transboundary Landscape Programme', ICIMOD has identified six landscapes in the Hindu Kush Himalayan region: Kailash (China, India and Nepal), Kangchenjunga (Bhutan, India and Nepal), Far Eastern

Himalaya (China, India and Myanmar), Hindu Kush Karakorum Pamir (Afghanistan, China, Pakistan and Tajikistan), and Everest and Cherrapunjee-Chittagong



*Figure 1: ICIMOD identified Transboundary Landscapes in Hindu Kush Himalayan Region*

Source: ICIMOD. 2018. 'Regional Programmes: Transboundary Landscapes', [http://www.icimod.org/?q=rps\\_landscapes](http://www.icimod.org/?q=rps_landscapes)

The KSLCDI is first of the four operational initiatives currently undertaken by ICIMOD in the region. The regional framework of the initiative was proposed in 2009 and finally signed in 2011 among the governments of India, China and Nepal. The signing of the pact was hailed as a 'Sacred Pact' (Shakya et al. n.d.) and an instance of 'South-South Co-operation' in the region (UNEP, n.d.). The then Indian minister for Environment and Forests, Jairam Ramesh affirmatively supported the idea as a 'first of its kind trans-boundary project'. He went on to say that: 'It is hoped that this would set the tone for more trans-boundary collaboration between countries in the region on science, culture and capacity building in the greater Himalayan region' (Ministry of Environment and Forests of Government of India, 2010). The mutually agreed ecological area covers territory in India (23%), in Nepal (42%) and in the Tibet Autonomous Region of China (TAR) (35%) (Shakya et al.,

n.d.), including a major portion of the Pithoragarh district of Uttarakhand, portions of Humla, Bhajang, Darchula and Baitadi districts of north-western Nepal, and Burang county in TAR China (Zomer and Oli 2011).



*Figure 2 Kailash Sacred Landscape Conservation and Development Initiative Geographical Coverage*

Source: Oli et al., 2013: 49.

To achieve its aim, KSLCDI is being supported by the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) and international development and aid institutions, primarily Deutsche Gesellschaft fur Internationale Zusammenarbeit (GIZ) and United Kingdom’s Department for International Development (DFID)-UK Aid. The scientific institute, Chinese Academy of Sciences (China), the Ministry of Environment and Forests (India) and the Ministry of Forest and Soil Conservation (Nepal) are the implementation partners of the Initiative, while scientific institutions such as the Institute of Geographic Sciences and Natural Resources Research (China), the G B Pant Institutes of Himalayan Environment and Development (India) and the Research Centre for Applied Science and Technology, Tribhuvan University (Nepal)

work as focal institutions to develop and update the country-specific implementation plans in consultation with the diverse stakeholders of the region (ICIMOD 2012b).

The major components and aims of the programme during its first implementation phase of five years (2012-2016) were stated as follows:

- Strengthening regional cooperation through the process of institutionalization of a regional framework for sharing knowledge;
- Adopting innovative livelihood options for the local population in terms of eco-tourism and community-based management of natural resources;
- To mainstream the eco-system management approaches throughout the national policies of the countries and establishing a balance between the scientific and traditional knowledge of conserving cultural landscape;
- To ensure access and benefit sharing to the resilient communities with the simultaneous process of environment monitoring (ICIMOD 2012a).

The case of KSLCDI is unique considering the security-dominated narratives of the participant countries, but the information available regarding the Initiative remains skewed and limited to ICIMOD publications. One can find only rare mention of the Initiative in the web-portals of the concerned government ministries and focal scientific institutes (especially in the case of China). Thus, this paper will perforce depend on a critical reading of various ICIMOD publications, such as workshop reports, feasibility assessment reports and the annual progress reports. The strength of the study lies in the fact that the process of *framing* of the agreement also reflects on the effectiveness of the implementation model in the region as ‘framing shapes the definitions of risks, the terms of participation, the range of policy options considered and the nature of political debate’ (Miller 2006). The initial reading of the KSLCDI documents offers a multi-stakeholder led initiative in the Himalayas, but the contextualization of the framework in the complex social and political realities of the region raises critical questions about the collective and synchronised commitment of the member states and its over-reliance on the West-influenced conservation solutions such as tourism. The case study of KSLCDI will also be useful to understand the international politics of states in the developing world around a natural but across-border culturally situated landscape.

### **Searching for the Transboundaryness of the Initiative**

As mentioned above, regional cooperation forms a major pillar in the implementation and success of the environmental KSLCDI. The basic idea of the Initiative requires identification of the challenges of an inter-connected landscape

and address to these challenges through shared resources and knowledge creation. But the disproportionate levels of transparency, the relative rarity of shared activities among the participant countries, and the limits of ICIMOD's ownership of the Initiative vis-à-vis the three participating states make it appear more as a country-based assignment. In effect, then, the Initiative channelizes the political priorities of each state in the ecological landscape. A close study of all the pre-inception workshop reports - held in Kathmandu, Nepal (2009), Almora, India (2010) and Jiuzhaigou, China (2010) - reveals the different priorities of the participant governments with regard to landscape conservation and development.

At the initial discussions, the representatives of the focal institutes presented rather similar socio-economic challenges related to:

- the undiversified livelihood options in the region;
- the lack of a biodiversity-related scientific database; and
- the prevalent illegal trade in animal parts and secondary forest goods across the borders.

But the most acceptable interventions for the common landscape were eventually the extended interlinking of the particular areas to the already existing national schemes and policies of their own countries according to their own national objectives. As also highlighted by the implementation plan, the delineation of the targeted area of KSL was carried out by each country '*individually according to their priorities in the set of criteria*' (ICIMOD 2010, emphasis added). For example, in addition to the necessity for regional cooperation / sharing in the generation of a biodiversity database (ICIMOD 2009), India put forward the potential use of rural development schemes such as Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA) as its intervention, while Nepal and China boosted their tourism policies for the sustainable development of the region. As the ICIMOD publications note, extending the Indian Sanitation Programme to the 9 villages of Pithoragarh (KSL-India), funds from schemes of MGNREGA and Swajal were disbursed in 2015 (GBPNIHESD 2017: 2). To follow up, the District Magistrate Pithoragarh, H.C. Semwal, in the KSL-India organized workshop stressed on the convergence of the Initiative with existing schemes and various departmental/agencies' activities (GBPNIHESD 2017: 22). District administration also extended its decision to financially support various KSLCDI synergy activities through MGNREGA.

In case of Nepal also, tourism has been an integral part of the government's narrative of sustainable development in protected and hinterland areas. But such policies have fallen far from their potential to enhance average daily income per tourist, its equal distribution among various ethnic groups and to implement successful community based natural management, a case in point being the

Annapurna and Upper Mustang region of Nepal (Gurung and Decoursy 2000; Nepal 2000). Despite this, with its great share in the country's GDP, the promotion of tourism becomes an obvious choice for successive governments to utilize as a tool for poverty alleviation in the KSL-Nepal area. With China's open-up policies and Great Western Development Campaign (2000), tourism again has emerged as major strategy in TAR for the region's socio-cultural transformation. Tourism in the TAR context more than just a simple economic development approach: it is criticized to be a loaded dice with expectations of establishing depoliticized narrative of Tibet by 'capturing differences for the market (commercial interest) only' (Shepherd 2007: 245). With such overlapping national objectives of participant countries, KSLCDI as a transboundary initiative is losing its agency and aim of addressing the interlinkage of poverty and environmental degradation in the region.

The final implementation plan of the Initiative also reflects a hierarchy among the institutions involved and their allotted responsibilities. The focal research institutions of the Initiative were appointed to implement the conservation and environmental monitoring plans, while activities related to sustainable livelihoods and participatory natural resource management planning were undertaken by government development agencies and their line departments (ICIMOD 2012a: iv). Thus the Initiative is still overtly dependent on the three countries' pre-existing and distinctive national legal and customary tools for environmental conservation in their area, undermining the common ground for the implementation and further evaluation of the Initiative at a regional level. As several critiques have highlighted, the establishment of trans-boundary protected areas in the developing countries could very well reinforce state presence in the loosely administrated regions (Duffy 2005). In the wake of the institutionalization of conservation rules and regulations, the border regions have become conversion zones within them rather than a dynamic cross-border presence. ICIMOD also remarks on the fragility of such environmental co-operation with regard to 'the sensitivities of international relations between the countries' and the 'challenges of intersectoral collaboration' (ICIMOD 2012a: iii), an issue which is reflected in the transboundary quotient of the Initiative.

According to information available in the KSLCDI annual progress report of 2016, bilateral relations dominate the regional narrative of the implementation stage. The regional dynamics of volatile India-China relations, Nepal's recent outreach towards China and, contrariwise, the (mostly) amicable outlook of India and Nepal towards each other, impinge on the ground working of the Initiative. As the KSLCDI India Newsletter, *Sangju* observes: '[V]alue chain work between KSL India and KSL Nepal is becoming increasingly cross-border through a community-to-community exchange of skills, processes and products. Officials from the Nepal Forest Department, the Ministry of Environment, Tribhuvan University, Kathmandu, and

pilot farmers from Nepal and India exchanged ideas and experiences about the Chyura [Indian Butter Tree] value chain (G. B. Pant National Institute of Himalayan Environmental and Sustainable Development 2017: 16), while resource persons from the Van Raji community in KSL India supported improved development of bamboo products in KSL Nepal (Kotru *et al.* 2016). Also, platforms such as the trans-boundary trade fair at Jauljibi are utilised by participants from India and Nepal to organize special discussions on issues such as the mitigation of human-wildlife conflict in the Kailash Sacred Landscape (November 16-17, 2016) (G. B. Pant National Institute of Himalayan Environmental and Sustainable Development 2017: 6).

Participants from India and Nepal also organize ‘yatras’ across the landscape in both countries to generate first-hand information to better understand the needs and priorities of stakeholders, the state of natural resources, and prospects for development in the landscape (Kotru *et al.* 2016). Similarly, a major decision was taken in the annual meeting on bilateral cooperation between the Government of Nepal and TAR-China to enable KSLCDI a clear space to support transboundary tourism. Thus, as the GIZ mid-term review highlighted (Kotru *et al.* 2016: 66), there is a need for improved communication among the partner countries, a range of transboundary activities, and the prioritization of funding for such activities in the project as state-bound and geo-political-led policies have the potential to defeat the whole purpose of the regional exchange of information and the strengthening of regional frameworks for the KSLCDI region.

### **Voicing the Ignored: Conflicting Narratives around Community Participation**

In global discourse, sustainable heritage tourism has become an essential feature of the economic development of culturally conserved areas. The idea of tourism prioritizes the economic value of the landscape and, if not implemented sustainably, raises the concerns of biodiversity damage, the mishandling of the cultural landscape by tourists and the benefit-sharing of the locally resident communities. In expressing willingness to establish the KSL as a world heritage site, the Annual Progress Report (2016) has already monetized the cultural value of the landscape as INR 13750 (USD 215) per visit/person for outside landscape visitors, and INR 1115 or USD 17 per visit/person for the inhabitants of the landscape (Kotru *et al.* 2016: vii). As Nepal and China place special emphasis on the utility of the idea, the simultaneous narrative of community-based management is appealingly hand-in-hand in all the documents. In the context of Nepal, a preparatory ‘Strengthening project’ workshop was conducted by ICIMOD and GIZ to explore the potential of inclusive community-based eco-tourism as a strategy for adapting to climate change and enabling the capacity-building of local communities (Roman *et al.* 2010: 6). As the final report of the workshop reflects, from the very initial stage the focal point of the discussion was skewed towards

concerns with regard to the accessibility of 'restricted areas' in the Humla region and the availability of infrastructure and transport (Roman *et al.* 2010: 11-12), leaving aside the real question of benefit-sharing among the local people.

In the context of Nepal, questions of the promotion of community-based resource management (CBRM) to ensure the balance between the human-nature relationship and also the equitable distribution of shares and profits from tourist ventures or natural resources (Roman and McEvoy 2010: 20) have ignited contentious debates which remain unaddressed in the project. The Community oriented conservation policies in Nepal replaced the 1970s and 1980s 'centralized and preservation-oriented approach' towards wildlife and biodiversity conservation with the establishment of the Annapurna Conservation Area (ACA) in 1986, under the administrative umbrella of the King Mahendra Trust for Nature Conservation (Mehta and Heinen 2001). Following the project, other regions of the Nepal have also followed this lead such as the Upper Mustang Region, and Makalu-Barun National Park and Conservation Area (MBCA), but there are very limited field insights available to conclude the effectiveness and so the reproduction of this approach in geographically similarly situated projects.

These case studies in the region (Adhikari and Lovett 2006; Dressler *et al.* 2010) present a divided view of the viability of CBRM. This empirical research has highlighted the factors of class and caste hierarchy in the running of CBRM and the consequent inability to ensure a just share to the minorities and the poor. According to the study conducted by S. Kellert *et al.*, on the ACA and MBCA regions, CBRM has failed in Nepal on all the parameters of equity, empowerment and biodiversity as 'certain individuals, communities and interests, materially and politically benefitted to a far greater extent than others' (Kellert *et al.* 2000: 709). Also, in the longer run, the power differential between the conservation and development policies becomes the norm, with developmental agendas tending to outpace the conservation efforts (Baral, Stern and Heinen 2007).

CBRM has definitely played its part in coordinating the people/park relationship (Mehta and Heinen 2001; Tachibana and Adhikari 2009), introducing locals with diverse economic and social services for the local population (Bajracharya, Furley and Newton 2006) in above mentioned cases but the lack of dialogue between the idea and its feedback limits the potential of the practice. Thus, while the framing of the Initiative is embellished with the jargon of neo-liberalism i.e., the inclusion of 'participatory management', and 'equitable, sustainable eco-system management and development', in fact it seems to avoid the interface with the socio-economic reality of the region.

Also in the case of KSL-China, the contentious relations of the Tibet Autonomous

Region with the central government of the People's Republic of China raise another set of complex issues of local representation and participation in the Initiative, and also of the latent extension of the sovereignty of the Chinese state through development and conservation policies. The most intriguing part of the Initiative in the TAR is the rarity of Tibetan-based institutions/experts in both of the preparatory KSLCDI regional workshops, where China had identified 'illegal trade', 'trans-boundary nomadic grazing', 'lack of infrastructure for the Kailash and Manasarover pilgrimage' and 'range-land degradation' as central issues of concern (ICIMOD 2010). These are also the phrases around which the central government shares conflicting narratives with the locals in the conservation debate. In fact, there is apparently continuous dissatisfaction among Tibetans about the increasing infrastructural development by the Chinese government on the sacred land, and encroachment on the spiritual realm in the name of the universalization of the Tibetan cultural heritage.

The Sacred Land Film Project (SLFP), which produces media and educational materials to deepen public understanding of sacred places and environmental justice, categorizes Mount Kailash among endangered cultural places. It observes: 'After years of complete religious repression, during which thousands of monasteries were destroyed and pilgrimage was forbidden, Tibet now struggles with cultural dilution as Chinese immigrate to the region with the help of government incentives' (Polidor 2014). Further, an appeal letter from the Tibetan writer, poet and blogger, Tsering Woeser, in July 2011 has disclosed the connection between some TAR-based tourist companies and their headquarters in Beijing (Woeser 2011), raising questions on the local-centric eco-tourism narrative and the question of the KSL's economic potential for the locals. It goes on to suggest, in the name of economic viability and market competitiveness, a new role for the rangeland as an economic resource and revenue-making entity, ignoring the complementary capability of local traditional practices and the diversified economic practices such as animal husbandry. The annual update subtly indicates that the KSL-China value chain activities could not make progress as planned as the local government had decided to stop the initiative on yak dairy-farming, considering the estimated costs to be too high and markets unreliable. The vegetable value chain plan was also dropped due to a lack of clarity on the links between the Tibet Academy of Agricultural and Animal Husbandry Sciences (TAAAS), which is the lead implementation partner, and the government of Burang County (Kotru *et al.* 2016: 14).

Increased relocation and forced urbanization are other realities on the plateau, increasing unemployment and social anxiety among herders (Fox *et al.* 2008). Their risk management skills, environmental skills and traditional knowledge had become redundant with the policies of de-stocking and rodent poisoning of the land (Central Tibetan Administration 2013). Though such increased involvement of the

market economy in the landscape has enriched the economic outlook of the region, it has also led to dramatic social and economic differentiation among the locals and a rise of ethnic tensions due to the immigration of mainlanders for economic opportunities (Fischer 2014; Goldstein and Beal 1989).

In a study conducted in the Northwest Yunnan region of China by Nyaupanea, Morais and Dowler (2016), similar concerns were raised where government tourism companies and migrant tourism vendors were found to ‘control’ most of the revenue-generating sectors of the tourism enterprise and to ‘dictate’ the form of representation of local culture to visitors. In 2012, this issue of the forceful removal of Tibetan nomads from their traditional homelands under the Chinese policy to civilize nomads came to the fore at a side event, entitled ‘An Ethical Framework for Global Governance’, of the Rio+20-United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development (Central Tibetan Administration 2012), where an argument was made for ‘maintaining the centuries-old, traditional and sustainable practices followed by Tibetans in managing the vast Tibetan grasslands’ (Central Tibetan Administration 2010). Looking at the current political realities around TAR and at the Chinese state’s increasing power and enforcement of economic policies in the region, the feasibility assessment report raises concerns about the misrepresentation of indigenous knowledge through the state machinery, the exclusion of locals from the decision-making process, and the extended authority of the Centre and centralized agencies over the autonomous region. This case study appears to reinforce the theory that, while international organizations have increasing power to connect the various stakeholders and advocacy networks and to bring endangered communities into the policy discourse, they also function to naturalize hegemonic narratives (Barnett and Duvall 2005).

## **Conclusion**

The case of the KSLCDI has again raised similar concerns, paralysing the operationalization of a meaningful regional biodiversity project. The case was chosen to introspect on the regional quotient in the framework of a cross-border conservation initiative, and to analyse it along the parameters of inclusivity and participation. The question of the challenges to the landscape and solutions to environmental problems in the KSL region was mostly confined within the wider environmental debate on ensuring sustainable development with the conservation and the inclusion of communities in the implementation of conservation initiatives. But the underplaying of the historical, political and social context of the specific region leads to the disregard of the ground realities in the region itself.

As discussed above, despite the involvement of various actors on the international, national, regional and local levels, the initiative appears to be a state-dominated

exercise stretching in different directions suited to the self-interest of the three states involved. The promise of community-inclusive policies appears to be tangled in the hierarchical arrangement of institutions representing the local population and state-led community interactions. The lack of local participation and the limited communication with the indigenous community in the initial framing of the KSL initiative in itself highlights the disregard of 'indigenous' realities. The uncritical acceptance of conventional developmental models in the design of such an initiative does not lead to an effective framework.

Currently, the development narrative has overpowered the conservation objectives of the KSL project with the participating states directing their capabilities and resources to the inscription of the allocated area as a UNESCO World Heritage site. Such policies, supporting cross-border movements of knowledge and people, could have the real potential to dramatically improve local livelihoods. The irony is that despite the all-pervasive rhetoric of expertise-sharing across boundaries and consideration of indigenous cultural and conservational knowledge, the institutional framework remains largely unresponsive. While the efforts of this South-South trans-boundary environmental co-operation initiative have successfully brought the hitherto physically and developmentally marginalised areas of the Himalayan landscape to the centre of the political sphere, the challenge now is to effectively operationalize the ideals of improving the quality of local livelihoods and encouraging principles of self-regulation.

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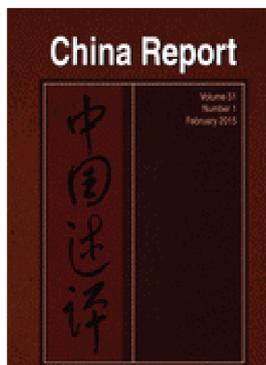


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