Alternatives India
VIKALP sangam

Report on the

Western Himalayan Vikalp Sangam

11th to 14th November, 2018

Tara Retreat, Jagori Campus, Himachal Pradesh

This report is compiled by Shrishtee Bajpai with inputs from Aadya Singh.

Thanks to the note-takers at the Sangam – Roshan Rathod, Meenal Tatpati and Ashish Kothari and to Norboo Tundup for video documentation. Pictures were taken by Ashish Kothari.

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Introduction

The eighth regional Vikalp Sangam was organised at Tara Retreat Campus of Jagori, Himachal Pradesh from 11th to 14th November 2018.

The second in the series of the Western Himalayan Sangams, this Sangam was co-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 Sangam brought together a gathering of activists, researchers and practitioners from the Western Himalayan states of Uttarakhand, Himachal Pradesh, and Jammu & Kashmir who have been working on rural livelihoods, waste management, conservation of wildlife, community-based tourism, local power generation, organic/biodiverse farming, education/awareness, resistance, pastoralist livelihoods, and arts/media.

This is the **15th in the line of alternatives confluences[1] being held across India**, with the aim of sharing experiences in creating and visioning alternatives to today's destructive model of 'development' as also to the structures of oppression, injustice and non-sustainability (capitalism, statism, casteism, patriarchy, etc). With such sharing also comes the possibility of greater resistance to such structures, more collaboration towards creative alternatives, and more collective advocacy towards systemic change.

The Sangam witnessed stimulating discussions, some fascinating sharing of grassroots examples, a night session on films depicting dams and alternatives, and exhibits of alternative products and work across geographies. Like most previous sangams, the food at the WVHS was local and very delicious!

[1] Vikalp Sangam is an ongoing process of bringing together practitioners, thinkers, researchers, and others working on alternatives to currently dominant forms of economic development and political governance. It aims to create a space to come together, dream and deliberate towards an alternative future. While resistance efforts are underway, and need to be supported, we also need to create a cross sectoral platform on alternatives (or constructive work) to share, learn, build hope, and collaboration

Day 1, 11.11.2018 : Alternatives to the mainstream models of development

The first day began with welcoming participants and requesting them to answer three questions (given below) in 6 different groups.

Who am I?

Why am I here?

What are my expectations from the upcoming four days?

It was an interesting session of sharing as people working in diverse areas shared their work ethics, elements of joy and reflections. Most participants spoke about their reasons for participation in the Sangam and shared that they were there to learn, gain inspiration from the stories of others, find an alternative to the feeling of being alone that accompanies a lot of development sector work, spend time with a like-minded 'biradari', explore how we can collectively meet our challenges, explore a larger vision of what our lifestyles/livelihoods could be in tune with Himalaya, formulate an action plan for the collective; and to strengthen the message that Himalaya has enough resources for everyone's livelihoods.

Post this session, the Vikalp Sangam process was introduced with examples from across the country as well as the Himalayan region, highlighting principles and values emerging from the grassroots that offer a vision for the future of society. The process underlying the Sangam is to give political strength so that we have cohesive standpoints to speak at various governance levels and strongly challenge the current state of affairs.

Post lunch, participants remembered and thanked the farmers who grow our food. Friends from Spite enthused participants with a song.

A brief context of destruction in the Himalayas

After this discussion, destruction in the Himalayas was discussed amongst the participants from multiple perspectives, first in groups and later in a plenary. Discussions revolved around how the ecological fragility of the Himalayas, along with issues of inaccessibility and marginality need to considered while studying the dominant political and socio-economic paradigm in the region.

A perspective from Kashmir was shared to highlight that environment destruction has been happening in the state under the gaze of armed forces in Kashmir. Armed conflict is used as a distraction to build ecologically damaging projects like Hydro-power projects. Also, the ecologically fragile area has been continuously destroyed by the army's intervention. 12 out of 25 firing ranges in J&K are facing serious ecological impacts. Along with it, the rights of pastoral communities are not recognised in protected areas, pasture lands, and forest areas.

Tourism: Serious over tourism across Himalaya was a major concern for all the states. Ladakh serves as a significant case study for the perils of overtourism beyond a region's carrying capacity - with mounting problems of waste generation and management, pollution of water sources and a lack of strong regulations defining limits to tourism. To add to all of this, tourism can only be looked at as a supplementary means of income generation and not a primary one, as it is not a stable source of livelihood.

Destruction/neglect of agriculture: Across the three states, government policies are actually anti-traditional agricultural practices. In spite of visible negative impacts of the Green Revolution, commercialised agriculture is promoted in the states. Excessive use of pesticides - especially in horticulture which is dominant in higher altitudes and colder regions - is now a common practice. Traditional practices of growing and eating local foods and crops are declining. Participants collectively felt that the root causes of these problems is a lack of vision on natural resource-based development, inadequate education, exploitative mindsets, a lack of awareness and gender inequities. The gendered perspective is specifically relevant to hill agriculture as women are not considered farmers, even though 90% of agricultural work in states like Uttarakhand is done by them). Animal-human conflicts have also begun to impact agriculture massively.

Development projects: Ambitious development projects like hydro-power, road extensions and smart city projects show a blatant disregard to the geomorphic condition of these fragile ecosystems. They have also been responsible for destruction, floods, displacement, and dispossession.

Some of the common root causes that were highlighted:

- Commercialisation of mindsets ('Let's make as much money as we can') is deeply rooted in the 'growth at any cost' model of governance.
- Individualisation of life - community sharing of labour is declining
- Urbanization, gentrification, take-over by outsiders and rich, significant increase in consumerism
- Absence of viable alternatives in state thinking, even in civil society, including movements for autonomy
- Disconnect between resource and the source, for instance, in terms of water scarcity

Day 2, 12.11.2018 : Alternatives to the mainstream models of development

The second day started with a small nature walk in and around the beautiful Tara Retreat campus.

The objective of the second day was to focus on alternatives to the destructive models of development discussed the previous day, and to envision a holistic alternatives framework[2] for the Western Himalayas as a whole.

Participants were divided into three groups with cross-cutting themes common across all groups.

Gender, power and environment

Four key guiding questions were posed to participants –

- History of your work, or why you do what you do
- How are you doing this work and with what results?
- How are you challenging the mainstream development model through your work?
- What challenges - internal as well as external - do you face and how can we come together to push forward these alternative solutions?

Broadly speaking, the following themes emerged from the discussion:

Livelihoods: Reviving traditional livelihoods on the one hand and creating new opportunities on the other (examples: organic and biodiverse agriculture or community-led ecotourism by Titli Trust, SLCIT, and KCC)

[2] http://vikalpsangam.org/about/the-search-for-alternatives-key-aspects-and-principles/

Technological alternatives: Leveraging low-cost, local technology for natural resource management and income generation (example: localised power generation using Chir pine needles by Avani)

Governance: Strengthening local governance to resist destructive projects (example: an army firing range in Kashmir)

Gender and power: Empowering women in decision-making and working towards greater equality amongst genders, challenging casteism and ethnic discrimination which is more prevalent in the Himalayas than recognised (example: the exemplary work being done by our host, Jagori Rural)

Wildlife conservation: Establishing or re-establishing a more harmonious relationship between wildlife and communities (example: the work being done for snow leopard conservation in Spiti by NCF)

Some of the key discussion points emerged out the three thematic areas:

Alternatives to extractive tourism

- The key alternative to mainstream tourism is **Eco-based community tourism**.
- We need to look at tourism beyond the issue of livelihoods and make it more sustainable by taking into account local ecology as well as culture while thinking about tourism.
- Identifying key challenges is key to creating such an alternative. The challenges discussed were:
- Very little sharing, learning and exchange of some of the successful initiatives in the region.
- A lot more thought needs to go into solving the issues of waste generation, reduction and management.
- Currently, there is no regulation and no studies to understand the impact of tourism on nature and local communities.

Food and Agriculture

In today's context, it is very hard to make agriculture viable regardless of geography. Factoring in the unique topography and ecology of the Himalayas, surviving on agriculture has become even more difficult. The Himalayas are a very fragile ecosystem, which makes communities extremely vulnerable. Inaccessibility and difficult market access are common issues. Traditional agriculture recognized these issues, and used diversity to sustain and combat low productivity and fragility of the ecosystem in order to ensure sustainable subsistence agricultural practices.

- Agriculture is a way of life in the Himalayas, and that narrative has to be reinforced.
- Beej Bachao Andolan, SIDH and Jagori shared their work on creating a repository and of traditional seeds and working towards their revival.
- Avani's work mitigating the human-wildlife conflict by fencing and planting indigo in the surrounding fields, which in turn provides income for the villagers was shared.

- Nature Conservation Foundation talked about mitigating human-wildlife conflict by promoting handicrafts and involving women in the conservation activities, thereby changing their attitude and behaviour towards predators such as the snow leopard.
- Corbett Gram Vikas Sangathan shared their work of forming a samiti (a federation) of 50 farmers who initiated a barter system and formed their own local mandi. The idea was to reduce dependence on the external markets.
- CORD shared their work on livestock insurance and promoting local breeds.
- Peoples' Science Institute shared their work on spring revival as mountain communities are dependent on springs as their primary water source.

Forests and biodiversity

- There are three main actors in forests - communities, other plant and animal species and the Forest Department.
- Avani shared their work of using pine needles, which have been largely responsible for the spread of massive forest fires in Uttarakhand, to generate energy and make pine briquettes which are used as an alternative energy source as well as incremental means of livelihood.
- Himdhara and Kalpavriksh shared their work on research and advocacy related to the implementation of Forests Rights Act (FRA, 2006) and sharing knowledge about it with local communities.
- Some of the success stories on implementation of FRA were shared.

- Post this, these examples were understood through the five spheres of the Alternatives Framework, to illustrate a holistic framework for Western Himalayas.

Some of the other questions raised were-

- How do we look at all these spheres (Economic democracy, direct democracy, social integrity, cultural diversity and ecological resilience) together while maintaining balance?
- How do you take these alternatives ahead?

The third day focussed on the framework and how each region can collaborate, learn and take these alternative initiatives ahead.

Community-based ecotourism (CBT) as an alternative to mass tourism:

- Need for awareness and shared principles, ways to assess capacity, assess impacts in advance, and do benefit-sharing with equity.
- Informal network of CBT initiatives.
- Documentation of local cultures, cuisines, biodiversity etc to share with visitors
- CBT marketing platform, value based marketing (like bringing in the conservation aspect, local foods, cultural aspect) can change the attitude of tourists, not-for-profit, building in principles, for W. Himalayas
- National pressure group on CBT and against mass tourism and waste issues
- Education / awareness regarding all of the above
- Need advocacy on event-based tourism also
- Dos and don'ts as a document – code of conduct, ethical bird-watching guide, and traveller guidelines.
- Promoting Home Stays, which could also enable responsible tourism. The onus would be on the traveller as well.
- RTI filing on the mass structures to check various violations, if any? Sharing info on a public platform after analysis. Reach to communities or legal action groups

Waste management:

- Need pressure group for this region, joining Zero Waste Himalaya.
- Demand Extended Producer Responsibility (EPR) but also need Extended Consumer Responsibility (EPR).
- Self-sufficiency of groups working on waste (Waste Warrior as an example)
- Keeping waste pickers at centre of programmes and including them in decision-making
- Capacity building of various sections, from households to corporations to CSOs
- Responsibility of consumers to also be raised
- Order re. plastic ban and encouragement of 'pattals' to be used

Forests and wildlife:

- Forest Rights Act awareness, advocacy, & use
- Community control over nature/natural resources more generally
- Share experience of resolving human-wildlife conflicts. For example the work of Nature Conversation Foundation, Spiti w.r.t. to snow leopards

Agriculture / food / water :

- Need to revive/sustain traditional values re. land, seeds, collective work etc
- Community spirit and institutions crucial for any alternative
- Put these sectors into educational system, mixing knowledge systems
- Recognising women's crucial role (in Himalaya, 90% agricultural work is done by them, and knowledge also)
- Self-consumption as vital objective of farming, esp. to tackle nutritional deficiencies including amongst most marginalized (caste, gender, class)
- Gram sabha vitalization for decisions on local resources
- Revival of traditional kul system; and of mixed farming (cropping/animal/forest)
- Localisation of economy including markets
- Advocacy of millets / 'coarse' grains and awareness of how to revive/spread
- Issue of caste inequality of landholdings (including unfair distribution of land in reforms to dalits) and of water control … including lots of unsettled rights, obstruction by powerful castes against reforms
- Need to go into value added products where agriculture in decline, e.g. Ladakh
- Revive/sustain traditional panchakki

Cross-cutting issues:

Social issues: Intra-family and intra-community issues of inequality, exploitation etc; 'community' is not homogenous entity and its complexities should be looked into.

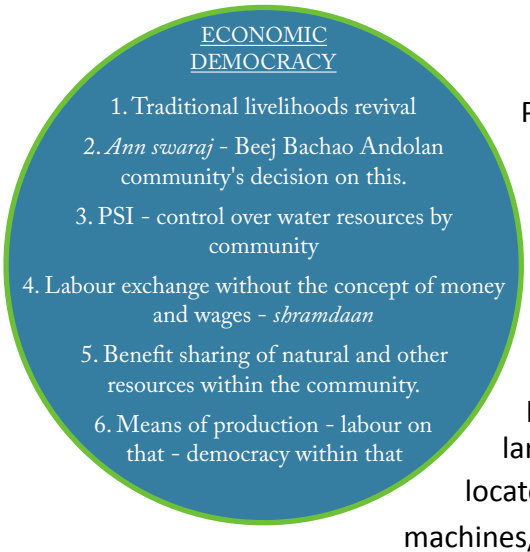
Economic issues

- Wage policy inequalities, with primary production amongst lowest paid, creating huge inequities; and unemployment in secondary sector
- R&D on primary sector v. low
- Revival of local haats (markets)
- Consolidated campaign on Himalaya, including through schools

Overall networking

- Need sustained interaction and exchange to learn from each other
- Those who came here to spread information and message to others back home
- Sharing practices, e.g. Avani's chir needle based power generation
- Sharing experiences of Himdhara to take control over forests; FRA advocacy learning

The discussion then happened specifically on each sphere of the alternatives framework. Some of the key points discussed under each sphere are mentioned below:



Economic Democracy

Production and consumption systems should be aligned to local resources, skills, contexts; localization, self-reliance, local exchange, and equity-based. Decentralised, small-scale based on locally available resources

Including traditional livelihoods, e.g.:

-Wool-based products & other handlooms to be given priority over industry-based products; but not centralized large-scale production (e.g. KVIC) but decentralized village located; and tech R&D oriented towards this esp. for small machines/easier production processes to reduce drudgery

- Pottery (kumhar), tambe vessels (lohar) vs. industry-produced

- Can local footwear production be revived, removing caste stigma, enabling more efficient production … and with examples like Chamba chappal that can be promoted incl design changes
- HH products like soap etc
- Millet-based / locally relevant trad agriculture (need govt policy on PDS, etc; awareness re. social status issues with millets not being lower status; and incr in consumer base, awareness re. nutritional value in schools etc).
- Promotion of pahari produce as being special, with higher returns etc
- Revival of animal husbandry based on local breeds, needing revival of traditional fodder, local ecosystems/pastures etc (with eradication of weeds as big issue), breed improvement of desi breeds; special focus on pastoral nomadic communities; fisheries also based on natural rivulets (requiring their regeneration/revival/conservation and change in destructive fishery practices)

New livelihoods options could be:

- Community based tourism with principles of equity/sustainability
- Value added agro-products, forest based products, household products
- Health services and visitation based on local traditions (with recognition as paramedics)
- Tech based jobs like power production, tech services, computer/cellphone services, internet based services
- Architecture, construction, hydrogeology, small-scale industry etc based on local and new skills
- New agr techniques like greenhouses for vegetables/fruits (need for more R&D by agr univ on locally relevant agr and agro-produce)
- Poultry feed and other input industries for animal husbandry
- Documentation, media

Livelihoods for urban poor: e.g. safai karmachari, wastepickers, small traders, migrants (with serious issues of casteism, 'local-outsider' divisions to be tackled)

- Urban areas and urban-rural links: Identify 'resources' in cities, esp. human skills but also primary sector ones that remain, to build more sustainable/equitable livelihoods & economy; services for ecological/environmental work including removing pollution from water, regenerating springs etc that will help both town and downstream villages … and build urban-rural connections of producer-consumer links (e.g. vegetables grown through this can go back to urban consumers)
- Revive 'green bonus' idea, with allocations and payments from central govt and from states in plains in return for ecological services provided by Himalayan states

- Skilling for employment in industries being set up in border areas (with plains) including through modification in ITIs etc (keeping in mind issue of which industries are appropriate; using green/yellow/red categories and completely banning red)

Principles for the above

- **Locally self-reliant regional planning** with local exchange based on diversity of agro/natural ecosystems … reviving local haats … bringing it back into trad melas or creating new ones
- Producer companies of farmers etc, **locally and democratically run**
- Power generation based on **local waste** / chir pine /waterways both for local use, revenues for villages/families through sale into grid, and to make a point re. big projects not needed at least for local needs; but truly micro-hydel (not govt model which is not really micro) and with **local production control**, and local micro-grids, and possible new technologies like vortex turbine & hydrokinetics (real run-of-the-river!)
- Local self-reliance **and autonomy** based trade/exchange, without destroying someone else's self-reliance and autonomy
- Issue of needs/aspirations, larger cultures of consumption
- Awareness of nature and impacts of current economic system to be spread through society
- **Including** marginalized sections (dalits, women, landless, etc), special economic initiatives for them
- Bringing back **commons into community control**, with checks and balanced, with institution building e.g. under FRA, and provisions for marginalized sections
- **Holistic economic revitalization** of villages to bring/keep youth back, for which training courses on old and new skills (see list of livelihoods above) (e.g. PSI 10 month 'Development Professionals Training' for training on economic issues, skills … for village youth recommended by Mahila Mandals.

Direct and delegated democracy

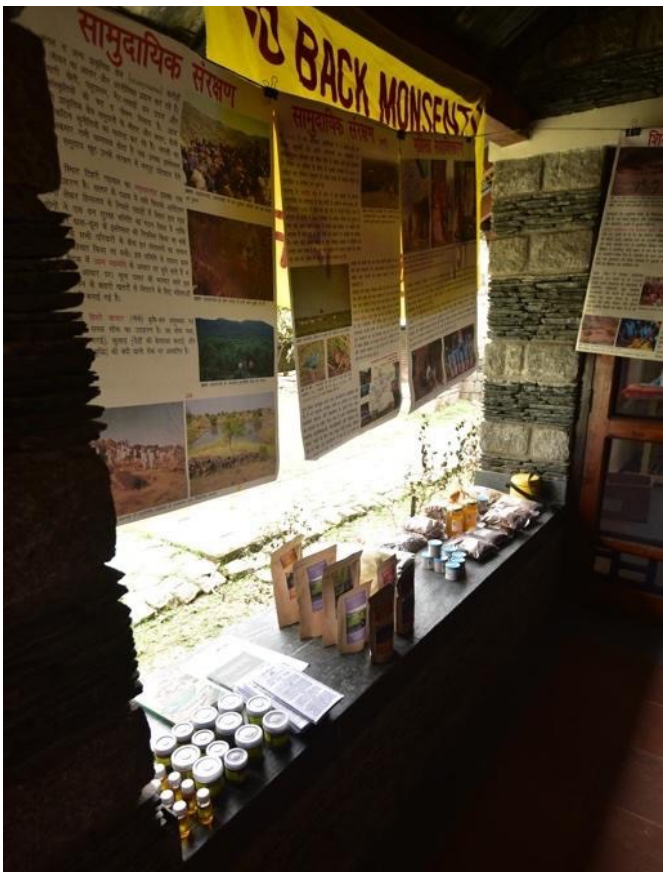
BIG ISSUE: increasing threat to democratic rights, threat to constitution, etc.

-Re-invigorate and guide regional parties that were involved with movements but since we can't rely on them only, strengthening panchayats

-Politics includes both electoral/party politics (but too much dependence on these) as also non-party political movements but then also to look at politics of such

movements. There is a need to keep a watch on parties, constantly challenging them

- Do we do enough of dialogue with communities on their political understanding?
- Responsibility of each individual towards political change
- Do we understand and dialogue with 3rd front (non Congress/BJP)?
- Issue of democracy inside our institutions
- Need to understand municipalisation of rural areas, undermining panchayats
- Issue of divisive politics and inequities of panchayats; need to decentralise more to gram/aam sabhas, with adequate building of capacity about rights, participation etc
- If at all electoral, then coalition govts may be better than single majority party



- Empowering people's institutions e.g. mahila mandals, yuvak mangal dals, linking them with panchayats
- Threat to values of constitution, how to mobilise to safeguard them …. and safeguard civil society spaces
- Need more on empowering gram sabhas (beyond panchayats); and on Himalaya context and flavour (including diversity e.g. Ladakh Hill Council; and on urban democracy

SOCIAL WELL-BEING AND JUSTICE

1. Only men or the upper caste involved in the decision making process
2. *Mahila mandal dals*
3. Waste warriors - changing narrative around the disrespect around the profession

Social wellbeing, justice and cultural diversity

-Importance of economic equality for social equality; proportional share of people on resources

-Same for political representation and distribution of power

-Issues of organised religion and their rigidity/orthodoxy; and in particular Hindutva nationalism linked to 'pahari culture'

- Links of 'pahari culture'. What is pahari identity? How to develop culture of respect for diversity, with nature as centre of our identity, e.g. traditions like newlyweds praying at springs, agr related festivals (but without patriarchal or other inequitous components)

- Our own internal biases contradictory to what we profess in public life, need for personal transformation
- Reservation? Necessary, but not enough … need mindset changes also

Ecological integrity and resilience

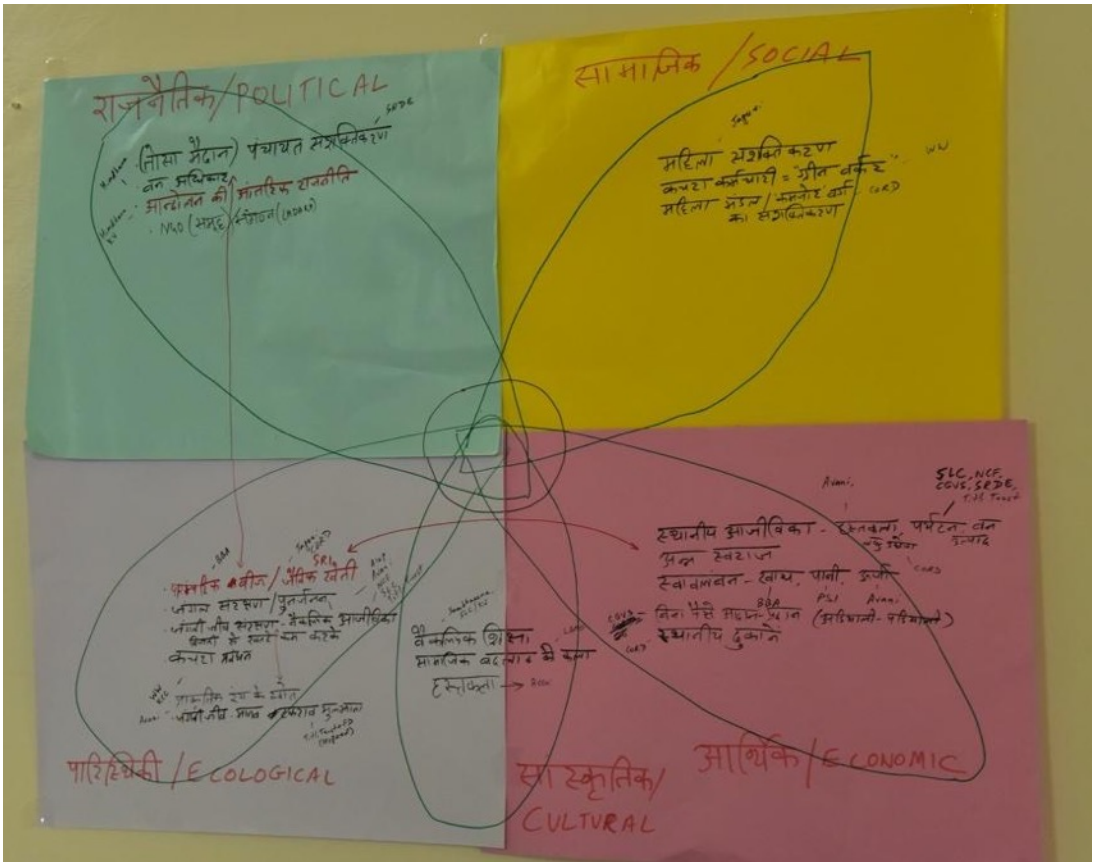
- Protected Areas concept to be changed to landscape level approach, with wildlife-people co-existing … crucial for Himalaya, including across state boundaries

- Changing mindsets that forests belong to FD; they are ours

-With such changes, human-WL conflicts can be reduced, livelihoods enhanced, wildlife conservation enhanced

-Can we develop a Himalayan framework for all of above?

- For CBT, code of conduct, principles … and common platform
- For all decision-making, communities at centre
- Regeneration of water sources / springs (learning from existing initiatives), linked to watershed/other projects … and governance/management by local communities including levying charges etc
- Changing narrative of 'development', need simple, local language material for local communities; and differently for policy-makers; both backed by research / evidence



- Biodiversity documentation including impact of human activities (including climate change)
- Learning from disasters; make document on disasters (including role of 'development') and disaster-preparedness in simple language
- Alternative framework for agriculture that is ecology-sensitive with many examples
- Alternatives on energy, understanding ecological impacts of these as well.

Follow up actions

A number of follow-up actions were committed to by the participants, towards the following end:

Transforming the above principles into a cohesive framework for the Western Himalayan region and documenting success stories from different sub-regions to illustrate possibilities and potential for holistic and inclusive development across the region through collaboration and knowledge-sharing

Vision document

Writing team: Aadya (economic), Roshan (socio-cultural), Sanjay (ecological), Faiyaz (political), Stanzin

Advisory team: Abha, Manshi, Debashish, Shaikh, Ashish, Dolma, Vijay Jardhari

Overall coordination of follow-up: Aadya

Various versions of this document to be created, for different audiences - community, government, policy-makers, etc.

Immediate follow-up actions:

- Strong collective statement on projects like Chardham roads
- LAMO to invite WW for suggesting solutions for waste
- RTI workshop for Ladakh and elsewhere: SRDE
- To join Pahad aur hum process: Himdhara/Sambhaavnaa
- Mini VSs or similar gatherings, at state/local level
- North Sikkim: KCC
- Ladakh: by NGO network, or by LAMO/SLC
- Traditional food festival: Jagori (Kangra); Garhwal /Rudraprayag (PSI)
- Natural dyes festival (Aug/Sept 2019): Avani
- Nature festivals: Titli Trust

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- Declaration of river sanctuary by gram sabhas on Rathong Chu: KCC
- Documentation of alternative initiatives: Aadya, Roshan
- Ecotourism code of ethics and platform: Titli Trust
- Kashmiri/Ladakh/Jammu youth, perspectives on future; taking this forward, sharing it … local Youth Sangam: MOOL

Feedback from participants:

a. Very useful sharing about alternative initiatives

b. No government representatives should be invited (2 were invited, could not come)

c. New things learnt, e.g. regarding spring regeneration by PSI and RRA network which could be applied in Ladakh

d. Nice to see common threads despite diversity of initiatives, e.g. on homestays / CBT

e. Good to see lots of young people ('kaale baal wale dikhai diye')

f. Good to renew contacts with people from long back

g. Lot of learning for us as new/young workers including meeting elders with so much experience.

Day 4, 14.11.2018 : Interaction with Jagori Rural and wrap-up

Day four included an interaction organised with Jagori on their work towards feminising consciousness at various levels and supporting women's leadership and agency. Jagori shared their work on building and raising awareness on violence, health, education and other issues critical to well-being of a woman and their collective empowerment. They shared their work on making cities more safe, creating Nari Adalats (Women courts), and working with women farmers. The discussions were stimulating and enlightening for many participants.