

# Shifting Cultivation in the Eastern Himalayas: Farmer Innovations as Lessons for Policy

Elisabeth Kerkhoff

International Centre for Integrated Mountain Development, Nepal

Despite intensive and lengthy government efforts throughout the eastern Himalayan region to stop shifting cultivation, the practice has remained entrenched over large areas. Recognising this, the International Centre for Integrated Mountain Development (ICIMOD), with support from the International Fund for Agricultural Development and joined by partners in five eastern Himalayan countries (Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Myanmar and Nepal), designed a new initiative based on the idea that shifting cultivation must make some sense if hundreds of millions of farmers continue to practise it despite all incentives to stop.

The study was designed to take a fresh and unbiased look at the practice, and especially at innovations introduced by farmers in response to modern pressures and restraints. The hope was to find innovations that would help resolve the current situation in which outside development and policy interventions are not taking effect, while the practice of shifting cultivation is deteriorating as a result of the limitations imposed on it. The aim was to raise awareness about issues related to shifting cultivation, to establish a platform for exchange of ideas, and to develop detailed policy recommendations to support the work of governments. 20 case studies on farmer innovations in shifting cultivation were completed in the five countries, and analysed for policy lessons. The findings were discussed at the 'Shifting Cultivation Regional Policy Dialogue Workshop for the eastern Himalayas' in 2004, and concrete policy recommendations were formulated. This work was published in a document addressed to policy makers, titled "Debating Shifting in the Eastern Himalayas: Farmer innovations as Lessons for Policy". The proposed presentation will be based on this publication, which is summarised below.

In the eastern Himalayas, shifting cultivation is the most prominent farming system, providing a way of life for a large number of ethnic minorities and other poor and marginalised upland communities. Many see it as unproductive and damaging to the environment, but they fail to see that farmers have for centuries been able to sustain their livelihoods on those lands where farming conditions are most challenging and slopes are steepest. A common policy approach to shifting cultivation can be found across the countries in this study: Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Nepal and Myanmar aim to replace it with permanent forms of land use. However, the current problems related to shifting cultivation are often found to be as much a result of counterproductive policies as of inappropriate land-use practices. Across the region there is therefore a need for new, more effective and socially more acceptable policy options that help to improve shifting cultivation, rather than replace it.

At stake in this debate are on the one hand some of the most diverse and unique biodiversity resources in the world. The Eastern Himalayas are one of the world's 34 biodiversity hotspots, the 'Indo-Burman hotspot', and accommodate important watershed functions. In north east India, as much as 65% of the land is covered by forest, extending to 80% or more in hilly areas. On the other hand there are the lives of millions of farmers, whose livelihood and cultural identity depends fully or partly on shifting

cultivation on steep slopes. Most of them belong to the poorest and most marginalised in their respective countries and subsist on less than 1US\$ a day.

The research presented here identifies farmers' traditional practices and more recent indigenous innovations that contribute to the benefits this farming system has to offer. These benefits accrue both to the practitioners and to other stakeholders, including national governments. Shifting cultivation, and the farmers' innovations in particular, were found to contribute to forest cover and biodiversity conservation, while at the same time maintaining agricultural and forest productivity. Commercial niche products and organic farming contribute to economic development that is adjusted to mountain circumstances and builds on existing potential. The local institutions developed by shifting cultivation communities were found to be relatively strong, and they enhance social security and cultural integrity. Development approaches that build on this existing potential and capacity are likely to be more achievable and acceptable to the farmers concerned.

Realising this potential and the need for policy change across region, the 'Shifting Cultivation Regional Policy Dialogue Workshop for the Eastern Himalayas' was held in October 2004 in Shillong, India, to discuss the research findings and formulate concrete policy recommendations. These recommendations were endorsed through the Shillong Declaration, which was adopted by all the participants, including representatives of government agencies, farmers, international bodies, non-governmental organisations, academia, science and research institutions, local institutions, international donors and development assistance agencies, the private sector, and other professionals.

The Declaration recommends that policy makers

- Re-examine the policies in place, removing explicit policies and instruments that discourage shifting cultivation;
- Strengthen the implementation of existing beneficial policies.
- Address issues of land tenure security, research, and extension, and their impact on traditional shifting cultivation practices;
- Explore market development and commercialisation of shifting cultivation niche products;
- Strengthen the capacity of customary institutions;
- Adopt credit policies in situations where common property regimes apply;
- Build coordination among the different government agencies that have responsibilities for aspects of shifting cultivation.

Since the adoption of the Shillong Declaration, and advocacy for the recommendations, the issues related to shifting cultivation have gained renewed interest in policy debate as well as in research and development. The new perspective has been appreciated well beyond the initial countries of the study, including in Southeast Asia. It has been welcomed by policy makers who realise that many of their efforts to replace shifting cultivation have not had the expected results, while the challenges remain as pressing as ever. In certain areas shifting cultivation is no longer banned. The National Forest Commission in India has applied for four of the policy recommendations to be adopted by the Ministry of Environment and Forests. In Nepal, policy makers have become more aware of the specific issues that shifting cultivators deal with, and in Bhutan the ban on shifting cultivation is again in discussion.

For many development workers, researchers and government extension officers who have been working in the field trying to 'wean' farmers away from shifting cultivation, the new perspective makes sense, and the identified technical innovations are useful. Many government programmes that were appreciated elsewhere would previously not work in shifting cultivation areas because of the constant struggle. The more appreciative and participatory approach promoted in this publication has provided them with new options.