



## Recommendations of an Expert Roundtable

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Scientists, technical experts, experienced diplomats and senior administrators from India, China, the Tibetan Plateau and neighbouring countries met in Delhi in a private roundtable over three days to **consider the prospects of consensus on problems affecting the ecology of the Tibetan Plateau, and future policy directions on trans-boundary issues.** Such trans-boundary gatherings are unfortunately rare.

The 50 hand picked roundtable participants gathered at the invitation of the Foundation for Nonviolent Alternatives (FNVA), **for intensive consideration of the bigger picture,** transcending the narrow concerns of separate states.

A common language, and common understanding emerged, in **which the Himalaya and Tibet, rather than dividing India and China, unite them.** On a wide range of issues, from rural livelihoods to the sharing of the waters originating in Tibet, and drunk daily by 1.4 billion people; from the dynamics of development to the militarisation of the high mountains, commonalities emerged.

This FNVA roundtable, from 28 to 30 March, 2014, **expresses its deep concern that a realm of traditional land management, indigenous knowledge, light touch nomadic mobility, respect for nature and a last frontier of pristine landscapes, is rapidly becoming, on all sides, the object of national development strategies aimed at intensive resource extraction, water impoundment and channelling, exclusion zones nullifying viable customary livelihoods, irreversible biodiversity loss and the redefinition of the whole Himalayan/Tibetan Plateau region to serve the needs of distant downstream and upstream communities, chiefly for water, electricity and raw materials.**

We discussed the prospects for greater official participation, and contributions from governments of the region. In the absence of established multilateral forums in the region, semi-official forums could achieve much. The many scientists involved have immediate opportunity to build not only data sharing but also collaborative projects.

Drawing on the professional experience of participants able to balance short term gain with longer term consequences, this FNVA roundtable draws to the attention of all regional governments the following **specific concerns:**

1. The Himalaya/Tibetan Plateau is a region which has the least international co-operation, the greatest deficit of trust, the least state-to-state meaningful dialogue, and a discourse dominated by the mutually exclusive sovereignty concerns of competing states whose boundaries bear little relation to nature, rivers, climate, population distribution or biodiversity.
2. This dominant discourse tends to **disempower local populations** who had formerly been able to trade extensively across the region, now widely reducing them to a marginal status, their loyalty to distant lowland capital cities questioned, their **needs ignored,** or at least not taken enough into consideration **their agency downplayed and their traditional livelihoods often disrupted.**

3. Physically, biologically and culturally, India and China, and other regional states are divided by the Himalaya, when in the past they were united by a common heritage as mountain peoples for whom the peaks were no barrier to the **flows of cultures, religions, languages, saints, pilgrims, mighty rivers, commodities** such as salt, wool, tea and cotton. Although **poverty alleviation is now much needed**, it is still imperative **to support customary livelihoods rather than promoting urban outmigration as the policy priority**.
4. The **extension of renewable energy, education, health services and telecommunications to remote mountain peoples** can now be achieved with today's technologies at reasonable cost. (The centripetal logic of statist interventions, centralising service provision in urban hubs only, is a development strategy that is no longer sustainable, appropriate or even cost-effective).
5. For the sake of the planet, and especially the highland people who are most concerned, this **asymmetric lowland dominance of the highlands** must be addressed. The preoccupations of competing states seeking short-term advantage in a zero/sum game prevent us all from taking seriously the longer term challenges that face us all. These challenges include, in the Himalaya/Tibetan Plateau, **the fastest rate of climate warming of any inhabited area of the planet, accelerating glacier melt, increased weather extremes, disastrous glacial lake outbursts, desiccation and even desertification in some areas, frequent flooding** in others.
6. Having heard from leading experts on these trends, we are convinced a shift of framework is required, from exclusive preoccupation with short-term national interest to long-term regional population and planetary interests. In the short term, glacial melt provides a dividend of increasing runoff, which will sharply reverse as the glaciers are already dwindling.
7. The Himalaya/Tibetan Plateau region is the water tower of Asia. However, distant metropolitan decision-makers increasingly see the region as **zones of resource extraction**, including minerals and especially hydropower for far distant users. While small scale hydropower for local needs is commendable, the overpowering plans for all the major rivers of the region will detrimentally impact on the livelihoods, biodiversity and environmental services currently available to the 1.4 billion people who daily drink the waters originating in Himalaya/Tibetan Plateau region. Again, a metropolitan agenda is imposed on marginalised mountain populations. The planned hydro dam cascades across the region, taken together, will foreseeably **aggravate seismic risk, disrupt biodiversity, livelihoods and ecosystems, often with little local benefit** beyond compensation for those most immediately displaced. While distant urban and industrial energy demand ever grows, hydro projects may seem misleadingly preferable to thermal energy; yet **hydro cascades also have serious consequences, further fragmenting rivers** at a time when holistic watershed management, and inclusive benefit sharing should be the basis for sustainable mountain community development, both up and downstream.

8. **Too many conflicts, and disputed borders, have remained unresolved for far too long, prolonging the marginalisation of the border peoples**, due to ongoing failure to cooperate on trans-boundary water sharing, making even basic hydrological data hard to obtain and share. Power projection now dominates. Senior leaders speak of softening borders, yet in practice they harden further.
9. **The reality is that mountain peoples are highly diverse, yet interdependent.** That interdependence is obscured and denied by closed borders.
10. Deforestation, desiccation and degradation are best ameliorated by state finance and expertise partnering with local communities in jointly designed and managed landcare projects to rehabilitate threatened grasslands, forests, rivers, wetlands, and habitats. **Social forestry, enhanced land tenure, community management of projects are the way forward.** State initiatives to rehabilitate degraded areas should engage all stakeholders, especially local communities, in generating programs that are participatory, voluntary, transparent and based on sharing indigenous and scientific knowledge. Local populations should not be blamed, or assumed to be ignorant of the limits of the landscapes they have long inhabited. **Resettlement to reduce grazing pressure should be voluntary, and for specified periods. Grazing bans that make no provision for restoration of customary nomadic land use and land tenure rights, once experimental rehabilitation trials conclude, effectively exclude or depopulate areas experiencing degradation. That is an unnecessary zero/sum logic that opposes people and nature.**
11. **Mining is especially hazardous** in the steep terrains and high altitudes of the region, known globally as the roof of the world. The deposits of copper, gold, silver and many other metals, now being exploited, naturally occur close to the major rivers of Asia. Their exploitation however generates **massive wastes that contain toxic metals, that must remain at the mine site for decades and centuries** after mining has exhausted deposits. The danger of adding toxic heavy metals to the great rivers of Asia is high and thus offers high risk of conflicts for societies and their politics in the future.
12. In the absence of effective initiatives at official level to negotiate meaningful treaties or even simple operational protocols on cooperative water sharing, or regional strategy to cope with a fast changing climate, **this roundtable calls for a comprehensive movement to advance the agenda of regional co-operation**, to ensure our national leaders do not lag behind public opinion.
13. This roundtable has generated a momentum to take action on strengthening collaborations and connections between researchers, and between their institutions, to share data, overcome language difficulties and arrange access to the watersheds of neighbouring countries. This second such FNVA roundtable **should lead to regular roundtables, an ongoing series of dialogues, and regular meetings.** Our roundtable need not be indoors only: let's include experiential field trips. We can set up e-lists, secure online discussion forums where people can share frankly, and help each other overcome

bureaucratic obstacles to sharing. Let us revive the spirit of Panchsheel<sup>1</sup>. Next year in Guwahati or Lhasa!

14. Media training, greater media engagement with regional water issues, feeding constructive story ideas to regional journalists to visit neighbouring countries can also help -avoid misconceptions. This roundtable summary is to be made available in English and in Chinese.
15. We propose a regional environmental monitoring agency that has access to all relevant data, as a **first step in disaster early warning** and prevention, and as a **trust building institution** wherein competing states learn to cooperate. Such agency should not be directly controlled by participating states, but be independent, with guaranteed funding and approved mechanisms, to call noncompliant states to order if they remain stuck in the old paradigm of zero/sum.
16. We propose eventual establishment of a region-wide watershed research institute to facilitate knowledge and data sharing, **to generate regional watershed assessments and encourage states to build confidence in each other**. This institute, with its focus on trans-boundary watersheds, will also be the appropriate base for region-wide biodiversity conservation monitoring initiatives and strategies, especially for iconic migratory trans-boundary species such as black-necked crane (*grus nicollis*), chiru antelopes (*pantholops*) and snow leopards, (*uncia uncia*). For a start we suggest to identify 10 such transboundary projects, that capture popular and official imaginations, and generate further momentum.
17. Eventually regional water summits, on a multilateral basis, are the way ahead, given the many states and people that constitute or rely on the Himalaya/Tibetan Plateau.

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<sup>1</sup> **AGREEMENT Between THE REPUBLIC OF INDIA AND THE PEOPLE'S REPUBLIC OF CHINA ON TRADE AND INTERCOURSE between TIBET REGION OF CHINA AND INDIA, April 1954** based on the following principles: (1) mutual respect for each other's territorial integrity and sovereignty, (2) mutual non-aggression, (3) mutual non-interference in each other's internal affairs, (4) equality and mutual benefit, and(5) peaceful co-existence.