

STOP ACCELERATING ECOSYSTEMS DISTRESS IN THE HIMALAYAS

WITHDRAW DRAFT ENVIRONMENT IMPACT ASSESSMENT NOTIFICATION 2020

JOINT STATEMENT BY 52 ORGANISATIONS, ENVIRONMENTALISTS AND EMINENT CITIZENS FROM 10 HIMALAYAN STATES

The Himalayas are one of the most vulnerable geographical regions on the earth. Fragility and vulnerability of the Himalayas has been understood and defined in several ways by scientists, scholars and local communities residing in the region. One of their most prominent features is the 'precarious balance' of the ecosystems, where even small changes in the landscapes lead to rapid and wide-ranging impacts.

The [Indian Himalayan region is home to about 80 million people](#), many of whom practice mountain agriculture, pastoralism and varied forest and nature -based livelihoods in diverse ecosystems, including species-rich forests and grasslands. [Covering around 16.2% of the Indian state's landmass, the region is home to a rich and remarkable biodiversity, housing 30.16% of India's fauna and 50% of India's endemic flora.](#) Himalayan states provide critical ecosystem services to the country. Around [41.5 per cent of the geographical area is under forests according to the National Mission for Sustaining Himalayan Ecosystems](#), under the National Action Plan for Climate Change, they comprise a third of the country's forest cover.

Apart from being one of India's major carbon sinks, the world's youngest mountain ranges also are the birthplace of three major river systems, the Indus, Brahmaputra and the Ganga. Originating from glaciers and snow bound peaks; their length and size, and the area they cover is larger than most peninsular rivers; their rapid, high velocity, meandering flow which is constantly shaping the young and malleable Himalayan valleys; their propensity to carry silt and form rich plains to facilitate a fertile agriculture downstream is another unique feature.

Yet, given our extractive economic development model these mountain, forest and river ecosystems are referred to as 'resources' to be exploited for profit. Rarely ever are these seen and regarded as natural ecosystems that are already providing services and support life systems, both human and non-human. The economic growth led development activities have disturbed these systems leading to unsustainable and unprecedented social, economic, cultural and ecological impacts in the Himalayas.

Threats to Himalayan ecosystems

Over the last three decades, governments have pushed policies and projects which have contributed to increasing deforestation, loss of biodiversity, soil erosion, drying of rivers, death of groundwater sources, hollowing of the

mountains, solid and hazardous waste related pollution. The three most threatening developmental activities that have met with strong resistance from local communities and environmentalists include:

1. **Hydropower Projects:** Hydropower development is being undertaken in the entire Himalayan region of India, to develop a potential of about 115000 MW power. A series of these projects are being built bumper to bumper on the streams and rivers to harness the capacity of the rivers to produce power to its maximum. Arunachal Pradesh followed by Uttarakhand, Himachal and Jammu & Kashmir are being transformed into hydropower hubs. These projects have changed land use, caused landslides and impacted the riverine ecosystems at an enormous scale. Projects like Etalin in the Dibang Valley are set to gobble up biodiverse forests. Nearly 90% of Indian Himalayan valleys would be affected by dam building and 27% of these dams would affect dense forests. If all proposed 292 large dams (above 100 MW) are constructed, on the basis of the current global number of dams, the region will have [the highest density of dams](#) in the world.

2. **Setting up of polluting industrial hubs:** The terai regions of the Western Himalayas are already home to industrial areas with highly polluting pharmaceutical and chemical industries. These have encroached upon forests and fertile agricultural lands. In Himachal, the rivers in these areas have been declared as critically polluted by the Central Pollution Control Board and groundwater is depleting at a fast pace. Dumping of hazardous waste in fields and panchayat commons has contaminated soil and air pollution is an emerging problem in these areas. A [CPCB report](#) in 2018 showed that the number of polluted stretches in the Indian Himalayan rivers has increased to 118 from 82 in 2015, and the number of critically polluted stretches—where water quality indicators are the poorest.

3. **Expansion of highways and infrastructure for commercial and large-scale tourism:** The governments in the Himalayan states are relying on tourism as its biggest revenue earner. States like Himachal have more than 1 crore tourists visiting annually. Commercial tourism in regions like Ladakh, Kashmir, Himachal and religious tourism in Uttarakhand have meant that there is an increasing push for infrastructure and mindless construction of roads, hotels and resorts. The [Char Dham road project](#) is a classic illustration of what such tourism can unleash. This has also meant a higher footprint in ecologically sensitive areas like the high-altitude and trans-himalayan regions. Solid Waste is turning out to be the major challenges that the Himalayan states are dealing with in the wake of large scale tourism.

As per the [government assessment](#), the “climate vulnerability index is found to be the highest for Assam and Mizoram, followed by Jammu and Kashmir, Manipur, Meghalaya and West Bengal, Nagaland, Himachal Pradesh and Tripura, Arunachal Pradesh and Uttarakhand”. The climatic crisis is already a threat for the region with erratic rainfalls, changing weather patterns, and climate

induced disasters disrupting lives and livelihoods of the inhabitants. Every year the Himalayan states see crores of rupees worth of damages due to landslides, flash floods, abrupt rains and forest fires. The impacts of the disasters are further exacerbated by the nature and scale of construction that is on-going.

Inviting disasters through misgovernance and faulty policies

This crisis has been worsened due to poor regulatory and governance mechanisms. Lack of adequate and thorough scientific planning and impact assessment studies, non compliance of environmental norms and social accountability laws, diminishing space for democratic public participation in decision making processes have further worsened the situation in the past few years. The Himalayan states have been lagging in the implementation of pro people and pro environmental legislations like the Forest Rights Act 2006, which strengthen community involvement in the conservation of environment and instead have followed the failed 'plains' model for unregulated development at the cost of local livelihoods and ecology.

The latest move of the Central government to dilute the 1994 Environment Impact Assessment notification through a new draft amendment is yet another step in the race to the bottom. We oppose this notification completely, because of its provisions which are meant to enable the ease of doing business at the cost of the environment and local communities. The EIA 2020 notification, if passed, will

- allow industries and project proponents to start work before gaining environment clearance vide the post-facto clearance route
- dilute the provision of holding public hearings for a series of projects by allowing exemptions - for instance highways and other linear projects in border areas will be not require public hearings
- dilute the norms and conditions for post clearance compliances
- make the EIA reports even more substandard than they already are
- conceal information about 'strategic' projects by not putting information on the same in the public domain

Already the EIA notification was weakened in 2006 and this new proposal is about further institutionalizing the changes that the Ministry of Environment, Forests and Climate Change has continued making in the last few years, in favour of the corporate lobby, to facilitate and ease clearances for development projects . Whereas the nature and magnitude of the current ecological crisis demands that a strong, robust and participatory framework on environmental governance be set up and implemented.

We, as representatives of organisations and alliances from the 12 states of the Himalayan region condemn this move of the Union government to dilute the environmental governance mechanisms and demand that the Draft EIA notification 2020 be immediately scrapped.

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