**For Sustainable Mountain Tourism**

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December 15, 2021

The theme of this year’s International Mountain Day was Sustainable Mountain Tourism. The theme was set to create awareness about the importance of sustainable tourism as a backbone for the economic sustainability of the people living in the mountain. Responsible tourism can play a key role in the sustainability of the sector without much stress on the natural habitats and mountain ecosystem.

The community-based nontraditional sustainable tourism models in mountains can contribute to creating additional and alternative livelihood options and promoting poverty alleviation, social inclusion, as well as landscape and biodiversity conservation. It is a way to preserve the natural, cultural and spiritual heritage, promote local crafts and high-value products, and celebrate many traditional practices such as local festivals.

According to the UN statistics, mountain tourism attracts around 15 to 20 per cent of global tourism. Tourism, however, is one of the sectors most affected by the Covid-19 pandemic, affecting economies, livelihoods, public services, and opportunities on all continents. In mountains, the restrictions of the pandemic have further compounded the vulnerabilities of mountain communities.

Climate change is another red alert for the life, livelihood, and tourism in mountains that has badly affected the mountain valleys. Deforestation and degradation have played havoc on many parts of the mountains. Pakistan’s case is evidence of the disaster continuously being done despite all vigilance of authorities.

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Post pandemic strategies and the climate crisis can be seen as an opportunity to rethink mountain tourism and its impact on natural resources and livelihoods, to manage it better, and harness it towards a more resilient, green, and inclusive future.

The subnational governments in Pakistan have to play a proactive role in taking care of their mountains. Two measures are very important to support the federal government policy frameworks that were developed with the consultation of the subnational governments. The foremost is to stop the housing and timber mafias from deforestation to changing the land-use for constructions. Secondly, the governments shall implement and letter and spirit the nature conservation and afforestation to restore the mountains’ actual environment.

Glacial Lake Outburst Floods (GLOF) is a major phenomenon in Pakistan’s main range of mountains. A Green Climate Fund (GCF) worth $37 million is being implemented in ten valleys of Gilgit-Baltistan by the federal government with the technical support of UNDP Pakistan. All the interventions were planned in consultation with the provincial government and the community groups. Somehow, the project has yet to come up with some significant outcomes. The GLOF phenomenon, however, cannot be stopped by the interventions planned in the project until the provincial government takes up necessary measures to put a halt to the causes enhancing the GLOF activity in the region. Precautionary measures shall also be taken before any disaster happens.

Special Assistant to Prime Minister on Climate Change Malik Amin Aslam has already warned that “the glacial lakes leading to floods had increased five times during the past three years due to massively increasing global warming.” It would increase the threat to sustainable mountain tourism too. But, we shall hope that the expansion of national parks in the northern areas along with a high altitude corridor linking all national parks at 14,000 feet would allow nature to be a bulwark to climate change.

The community-based tourism approach and mechanisms were developed to manage the facilities created in the Central Karakoram National Park (CNP) when it was reestablished under the Pakistan-Italy Debt Swap Agreement (PIDSA). A comprehensive management plan was also developed and approved by the respective authorities. The need is to use that plan to develop sustainable mountain tourism based on nature conservation. The same may be replicated in other parts and provinces of the country.

In a panel discussion organized by Devcom-Pakistan, the experts have urged the authorities to think about the nontraditional business models for sustainable mountain tourism. It is indeed pertinent for the economic sustainability of mountain tourism that needs transformation from the conventional snow and ice-based adventure sports and tourism to contemporary innovative business models. Mountain cultural festivals, visits to heritage sites, mountain biking competitions, and jeep rallies will work from now onward after the deterioration of mountain ecosystems.

The sustainability of nature-based mountain tourism is likely to be threatened in the wake of the worst climate impact. The Covid-19 has already shown its impact on mountain tourism. The governments need to take immediate steps to revive the tourist destinations to ensure safe and consistent livelihood for the mountain communities. Many companies engaged in mountain tourism have gone bankrupt during the pandemic. Soft loans and grants could help them restore their businesses.

Unfortunately, the Covid-19 pandemic has severely impacted mountain tourism by disturbing the supply chain while climate change has devastated the mountain ecology and culture. Many of the Pakistani companies have already closed their businesses. Government shall come up to support them to revive their businesses. On the other hand, we see mushroom growth of small tour operators that have no experience of the business and knowledge of the terrain. Some of them have met with accidents too. They need to be trained for safe and sustainable tourism business.

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