

MOUNTAIN LEGISLATORS' MEET

13th
DECEMBER
2020



Acknowledgement

We are happy to share the proceedings of the Mountain Legislators' Meet 2020 which was successfully conducted virtually despite the trying circumstances posed by CoVID 19. This Meet would not have been possible without the active and full support of many people and organizations. First, we would like to thank the Chairman of the meeting Shri Vincent Pala, Hon MP Lok Sabha, Shillong. He, without hesitation, agreed to Chair the session and lead the discussion.

Second, we thank our esteemed Speakers Dr. K. Srinath Reddy, President PHFI and Shri Hari Nair, Founder of Holiday IQ for engaging with our mountain Policy makers on the key concerns of health and tourism.

We would also like to extend our sincere gratitude to all the Member of Parliaments and Member of Legislative Assemblies of the mountain states who seamlessly participated in our online platform and shared their valuable comments.

And finally, my own colleagues from IMI Governing Council, SDFU and the IMI Secretariat team need to be thanked for tirelessly working for this event to make it a success.

Gangtok: December, 2020

Prem Das Rai, Convener
Former MP LS & Governing Council
President, IMI

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Mountain Legislators' Meet 2020

The Indian Himalayan Region (IHR), constituting Jammu & Kashmir, Ladakh, Himachal Pradesh, Uttarakhand, Sikkim, Arunachal Pradesh, Nagaland, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Tripura, and the hill districts of Assam (Dima Hasao, East Karbi Anglong and West Karbi Anglong) and West Bengal (Darjeeling & Kalimpong) covers over 16.2% of India's total geographical land area and host a rich diversity of culture with huge repository of traditional ecological knowledge.

Given their relatively small and scattered populations, mountain communities often go unheard in political and policy discourse of the country. Despite significant progress, technological advancement, and communication developments in the lowland areas of India, economic growth in the Himalayan States has not translated into inclusive livelihood opportunities for the rural poor, especially the youth. Poverty, vulnerability, and inequality are widespread, and access to resources and services and gainful employment opportunities are limited. An essential question is how poverty, gender, vulnerability, social inequality, and livelihood insecurity in the mountains can be better understood and addressed giving special emphasis to the younger generation's aspirations.

A Mountain Legislators' Meet is annually organized by IMI to bring together lawmakers of the IHR to deliberate on the policy implications and engagement necessary emerging out of SMDS IX sessions. In the context of COVID19, this year the discussion of MLM will focus on:

- Health and vaccine issues
- Green recovery in the Tourism sector



Proceedings

Introduction



Context Setting
Shri P.D. Rai
President IMI

Shri P.D. Rai welcomed all the viewers, Speakers, Hon'ble Members of Parliament, Hon'ble Members of the Legislative Assembly, and those working closely with public policy in their respective constituencies to the 9th Sustainable Mountain Development Summit (SMDS) which is a flagship annual program of the Integrated Mountain Initiative (IMI). He further added that the 9th SMDS is being hosted by IMI's State Chapter of Uttarakhand, the Sustainable Development Forum of Uttaranchal (SDFU).

Shri Rai spoke about the 3rd Indian Himalayan Youth Summit (IHYS) which was organized as part of SMDS IX on the 8th and 9th December where about 120 state delegates from across the 9 mountain States, 2 Union Territories and hill districts of Assam and West Bengal participated. The youth deliberated among themselves on 5 chosen themes and came out with a Youth Declaration. He added that Shri Amitabh Kant, the CEO of NITI Aayog, was the Chief Guest during the 3rd IHYS and he reiterated the support of the government to the youth of the Himalaya. Shri Kant further spoke about the importance of sustainable development in the Indian Himalaya due to its fragility emphasising that there is an urgent need to build back better and greener. Shri Sanjeev Sanyal, the Principal Economic Advisor, Government of India, attended the Valedictory plenary of the 3rd IHYS where he argued that the digital way is the way forward in the mountains.

The Inaugural Session of the SMDS IX was on the 11th December 2020 which was attended by the Hon'ble CM of Uttarakhand, Shri Trivendra Singh Rawat, as Chief Guest. He spoke about the need for

a Himalaya vision. He also recognized the work of IMI and the importance of the integration that IMI does through summits such as these. He also emphasised that the recommendations need to go forward in the form of policies for all the mountain states. The occasion was also graced by Shri Conrad Sangma, Hon'ble Chief Minister of Meghalaya and he spoke about the work being done to address job losses and the pandemic in his state, while also recognizing the contribution of IMI to the sustainable development agenda of the Indian Himalaya.

Shri Rai further spoke about the SMDS IX where the discussions have been around post-Covid-19 scenario and how to get the mountain economy back on track. Through the discussions we have learnt that the state coffers are not in good shape, there are problems across the borders, and now we need to build back better, and build resiliently in areas like climate change, Disaster Risk Resilience, Water security, green jobs, farming sector and technology (through Innovation). Cross-learning about local innovative ventures facilitated by the summit was fascinating such as how organic Kiwi wine is being produced in Kameng, Arunachal

Pradesh, or how world-class cheese is being made in Uttarakhand, how the value of tea is being realized for small growers of tea in Darjeeling, or how apples are being packaged and exported in Kashmir. In the last session the discussion was on partnerships and funding that can be built for people and communities to realize the full potential of the digital future.

With this summarization, he handed over the to Shri Vincent Pala, MP of Shillong, Meghalaya who is Chair the Mountain Legislators' Meet 2020.



Address by Chair of MLM 2020

Shri Vincent Pala

Member of Parliament (Lok Sabha), Shillong, Meghalaya

Shri Vincent Pala welcomed and thanked the all for attending the MLM 2020. He talked in brief of his association with IMI and the previous MLM which was conducted in Shillong in 2019. He spoke about the common issues of mountain states of India, one crucial one being financial burden which has intensified with Covid-19 and it has huge impact on different communities. Therefore, sending a message to work collectively and urging all stakeholders to gather for collective action to build pathways towards recovery should be different and have features of resilience, around migration, climate change, so capitalizing upon community networks is essential. Shri Pala briefed the House on the theme of the session on MLM which is public health and tourism, both extremely important in the post-covid era. With this he invited Shri K. Srinath Reddy to speak.



Session I: Health and Vaccine Issues



Talk on Covid-19 Health & Vaccine

Prof K. Srinath Reddy

President, Public Health Foundation of India

Prof Reddy started by emphasising the importance of public health as sustainable development cannot take place if health is endangered. The key points covered by Prof Reddy are below:

- Health is crucial whether it is Climate Change or economic development, everything is interlinked, infact Covid is a Zoonotic disease. These are all integrally related.
- India currently has the 2nd highest cases in the world, but those are not adjusted for the population size. When we look at the number of deaths or cases per million population, we are not as high as countries in Europe or the USA. This doesn't mean that there is cause to be complacent, we still need to control the pandemic to ensure that the loss of life, death and disability also greatly contained.
- If we look at deaths per million in India, it is about 103.6 deaths per million right now. Whereas if you look at the United States it is about 900 deaths per million. It is similar for European countries.
- Nevertheless the threat remains, also seen in the mountain states. We need to look at these measures of cases and deaths per million, along with trends to gauge how the pandemic is evolving or regressing in these areas and then take public health measures to slow down the pandemic until more effective measures come in place.
- Many measures that are being used from the beginning of the pandemic including the doubling rates are no longer useful in an established pandemic. But what is usually more important are the cases per million, tests for million, test positivity rate, case fatality rate. It is useful to track deaths per million to look at case management of confirmed cases and preventative measures taken.
- You have to look at other measures like weekly death count or weekly count of fresh cases. The

problem with counting cases is that it is quite dependent upon the testing type employed. We now know that the RTPCR test which is the standard test everywhere does have a few false negatives and we already know that the rapid test has even higher false negatives. Therefore, while important cases per million are not all that reliable as a tracker.

- Now if we look at the Himalayan states, there is considerable variation. For example if we look at Ladakh, it has the highest deaths per million, highest tests per million and highest cases per million, but case fatality rate is low. It is 1.3 whereas for a state like Sikkim it is 2.3. This is because when you test more you are likely to influence the denominator in terms of the number of cases and that leads to inclusion of many more milder cases as well and therefore your case fatality rate will appear low. Whereas if you reduce the total testing rates, the case fatality rate will be high. These are some things to be kept in mind while interpreting these data in real time for comparing other countries and states.
- Overall deaths per million is a good measure of success both in terms of population based prevention as well as detected case management.
- To track the epidemic, weekly death count is a good indicator. While there can be undercounting it is not variable over time therefore the noise to signal ratio can be controlled. Therefore, weekly death count coming down is a good indicator of the epidemic coming under control. WHO has also said that it is ideal to keep the test positivity rate under 5%, therefore we might also like to track that.
- The public health objective now is to slow down the pandemic as it is unlikely that we will be able to get rid of it completely. It may become endemic in our population but there may be less death and disease due to public health measures including vaccines.
- Till the time that happens we need to slow down the disease, this is why public health measures like lockdown, social distancing, masks, hand washing, were important but we must not forget super spreaders can be in crowds, they could spread to 20-40 people. We therefore need to prevent super spreader events while continuing with other public health measures.
- There are three escape routes from pandemic, first is herd immunity to quickly let the virus spread to about 60-70% of the population and get herd immunity. Unfortunately, ICMR survey says 90% of the country overall is still not exposed to the virus. Therefore by the time we reach 60%, we will have many more deaths. Herd protection: example if 60% in Delhi acquire immunity, 40% who are non-immune might get infected when they go outside to another part of the country. We will need herd immunity across the country and the world. This is not practical and might take a few years.
- Vaccine: There are about 7 different platforms for vaccines, but ultimately the objective is how to stimulate immunity, not just in terms of antibody but cellular immunity which can be protective. The antibodies seem to decline in about 3 months time but the cellular immunity lasts for 6 months or more. The important thing is, how to protect vulnerable until the vaccine has reduced transmission. Even the vaccines are not going to be in large numbers, need vaccines which don't have stringent cold storage requirements. We have to wait and see how effective it will be, or how safe it will be. First consideration is safety since we will be giving this to healthy people, second is efficacy, third is duration of protection.
- What we need is efficacy, duration of protection by vaccines should be tested and slow down in chain of transmission must be aimed.
 - (i) Continued wearing of masks is needed despite vaccine tests at least for a year, public health precautions have to be taken.
 - (ii) First priority for getting the vaccine will be those who are essential workers (frontline healthcare workers etc.) and vulnerable (elderly or having comorbidities).



Shri Sonam T Venchungpa
MLA, Sikkim

- For Mountain development, the vaccine becomes crucial, but who will fund it when mountain states are already strained, resource mobilization is tough for mountain states?

Answer: It should be funded by the government, and administered free of cost, as it is a public good. Enhanced tax structure or cess can be decided by state and central government, but the vaccine needs to be free.



Shri Jitendra Chaudhury
Former MP, Tripura

- The number of Covid affected persons compared to other countries is less, is it actually true? In my state there is no organized system to test what you see in other countries.

Answer: Testing rates have been low, in recent times testing has picked up. Deaths per million becomes a measure for monitoring the epidemic. Number of deaths is actually lower in the whole of South Asia, due to large youth population, rural residences



Shri Amar Singh Rai
Former MLA, West Bengal

- In Darjeeling with tourist inflow there is a misconception regarding COVID, tourists are being complacent. How to change the mindset of people? While we can be impressed to see rates of death are declining, when we look into it a lot of people may be hiding their symptoms due to social stigma.

Answer: Declining deaths is a good indicator. It is not completely gone and there is an undercounting of cases.



Dr Skalzang Dorjey

Chairman, Block Development Council, Leh

- How can villages remotely located be immunized? Can there be priority for Himalayan region?

Answer: Should be negotiated. For difficult to reach areas, this is where lessons from the universal immunization program come handy.



Dr Rohit Sharma

MLA, West Bengal

- How do we plan for effective, speedy distribution given the difficulties of infrastructure, communication and limited supply? Do we have a strong interim plan to take care of immediate issues?

Answer: Public Health measures have to be in place, physical distancing has to be maintained. Slowing down transmission is necessary, due to evolutionary biology, the virus becomes less virulent, if made difficult for it to transmit is one way to battle.



Shri Punchok Tashi

Executive Councilor, LAHDC Kargil

- Does Covid have relation with changing temperatures? In cold weather, are people more vulnerable? In our areas (Ladakh) people remain cut off for 6-7 months, so what could be done for these areas?

Answer: Virus survives longer in cold temperature, 10 times longer, several days that is, in dry temperature assists it.



Shri Himalaya Shangpliang

MLA, Meghalaya

Comment: As policy makers we need to come together to apprise our government about preparation of infrastructure. We need to ask to provide for infrastructure, should have preparation, logistics should be ready.



Shri Tashi Gyalson
Chairman, LAHDC Leh

Comment: We also need to think about preparedness and how to make the vaccine free.



Shri Rakkam Sangma
MLA, Meghalaya

- In Garo Hills, Indica Citrus was administered to patients. Is it that our climate is different, or that we are tribals and have a different diet, because of this our Covid death rate is low? I wish to draw the attention of more scientists to this and request them to do research as there can be some interesting observations here.

Answer: Citrus helps one fight off virus, innate immunity is important. What we eat, builds our immunity, high fibre for gut bacteria, they help, tribal communities are the best example, certainly there is great opportunity to explore.



Session II: Green Recovery in the Tourism Sector



Talk on Livelihoods, jobs, employment and green recovery in the Tourism sector
Shri Hari Nair
Founder, Holiday IQ

Shri Hari Nair started by talking about the structure of his presentation. The structure of his presentation, along with key points are below:

1. As a consequence of pandemic, global trends in mountains
2. Trends in mountain states subsequent to event of last year
3. Implication we see over next two to three years
4. What should be our strategy?
5. Conclude with a few points about mountain-specific policies.

Global Trends:

- New technology coming into play that has an impact on tourism- in telecom it is 5G, AI will play itself out, blockchain (bitcoin, paper currency) has potential for usage in tourism.
- Remote work is here to stay, white collar work will be done remotely. Equally when people don't travel, then the hotel and airline industry will be impacted by the remote work phenomenon.
- Highly Qualified professionals are moving to smaller places, falling rents are proof, this is so that they can avail greater quality of life.
 - (i) Tourism today is merging with characteristics of other industries, such as entertainment, virtual tourism- people can see, feel, and experience sitting at home. (Digital entertainment). For example, AirBnB is offering a large virtual experience.
 - (ii) Tourism is becoming about learning, a lot of experiences are actually about locals teaching something local culture to people far away.
 - (iii) To be part of a community.

- Local resistance to tourists coming into their locality, mass tourism, Problems: Dramatic loss in green forest, people come to mountains for greenery, for the breathtaking views, these are their strengths, so forests need to be protected. Infrastructure, lots of mountain states are inaccessible, it is a big issue, so it gets concentrated in a few places.

Problems:

- Dramatic loss in green forest, people come to mountains for greenery, for the breathtaking views, these are their strengths, so forests need to be protected.
- Infrastructure, lots of mountain states are inaccessible, it is a big issue, so it gets concentrated in a few places.
- Loss of authenticity, our communities start looking different and cannot resemble, this has economic consequences. We need to reclaim the difference between mountain life and city life.
- Lack of specialized education, high quality design, there is no design institute in mountains.

Two trends have come up post pandemic- periodic movement (tests prior to moving), that can have impact on tourism:

- Periodic curbs will become feature of how we respond to this pandemic,
- Local resistance will increase, they wouldn't want to open up, local need for safety and economic needs have to be balanced.

Possible Implications: Product-related

- Length of stay will change People want to stay longer, they are not on holiday, they will be digital nomads. They need leisure infrastructure and working infrastructure- meaning high quality internet structure.
- As people stay long periods, the hospitality psyche has to change- working round the clock becomes essential. Have to consider both what guests want during the night as well as during the day.
- Learning opportunities should be created. Transmitting what is authentic to a community or a place, learning secrets from a place is more interesting, and trains people to impart that education to others.
- Go beyond the superficial community activities. People will be staying longer, so integration into the community will be of different nature.

Possible Implications: Measurement-related

- Rethink measurement of success.
- Mountain states should move from number of travellers as a metric to number of traveller days.
- Need to look at value addition by tourists coming to a community.

Strategy:

- Need to reduce the number of travellers to carrying capacity. To offset this, many more destinations have to be created.
- Marketing: When industry comes to you, marketing is essential, who is going to be the target customer?
- Tourism in the future will be about storytelling. This will be an important skill to build.

Policy:

- Social infrastructure , particularly medical infrastructure needs to be developed since tourists will be staying a long time.
- Integrate tourism with other areas, agriculture , forest should be integrated.
- Build storytelling as a skill
- Regenerating areas that get destroyed due to tourism



Shri Kishore Upadhyay
Former MLA, Uttarakhand

Comment: The biggest challenge in Uttarakhand is that about 9 lakh youth have returned to Uttarakhand due to Covid-19 and are dealing with depression. 65 youth have taken their lives. There is no module for development of the middle Himalayas. All forest laws, water laws etc. should be inclusive, considering the needs of the common man in the Himalayas.



Shri Himalaya Shangpliang
MLA, Meghalaya

Comment: How do we provide jobs to the young men and women who have returned? Can we all together create a road map for this which can be submitted to the Centre? How can we develop the tourism sector while not having an overflow of tourists? We should encourage initiatives like online kitchens, showcasing local cuisine.



Shri Sonam T Venchungpa
MLA, Sikkim

Comment: Maybe the number of traveller days divided by the number of travellers would be a stronger metric.

- With regards to the trends—what will happen with proprietor tourist stakeholders we have? To create new destinations, what about the funding? Forest laws need to be moderated for tourism development. How to make Mountain issues relevant at the national level?

Answers: On how to draw the attention of the center: There are globally so many people looking to move. Can we together look at getting 100 highly qualified people to move to the IHR? This in itself will get the attention of the center. On what will happen to existing players: We will have to train them so they understand what is coming. Apart from that, they are creative people and can decide what to do.



Shri Jitendra Chaudhury
Former MP, Tripura

- Domestic travellers are usually middle class. They have been very affected by the pandemic. How will the middle class afford to travel right now? We must push not just for reforms to tourism but also a larger economy. The middle class needs to be benefitted.

Answer: Without domestic middle class travellers, it is difficult to have much tourism. However, we are at a point where the world is changing. Mountain states can get foreign tourists now if we push for the next 3-5 years. The world will become our market for the first time.



Shri Amar Singh Rai

Former MLA, West Bengal

Comment: Overcrowding in Darjeeling is affecting civic amenities. Hill states are going for homestays, more concessions, levies, electricity subsidy, to decentralize tourism. Bring new dimension to tourism, beyond just walking around the mall etc. Forest tourism has untapped potential. Forest laws are stringent, the forest department won't take a step to change, why can't we promote village tourism? Set-up forest product related factories, similar to tea factories. Such as a paper mill or plywood factory.



Dr Rohit Sharma

MLA, West Bengal

- There is growing dependence on IT. How do we ease this transformation for businesses and individuals?

Answer: Every person below the age of 25 will be comfortable with online. But we need to tell them what stories they need to talk about that get other people interested. Will be able to attract worldwide audiences. There is a small blogger in Tamil Nadu who does food blogs, and has millions of followers. We need this kind of authentic content. Homestays are still a big opportunity. New opportunity is 'second homes'. People who want to live for part of the year in hilly states. Need to craft a new homestay policy. The big opportunity in forest tourism is to use it as an opportunity to get travellers to learn.

CONCLUSION



Closing Remarks
Shri Vincent Pala

Shri Pala thanked the speakers and members who attended the meeting for making an engaging and interactive session. He requested IMI to collate all the deliberations and recommendations which can then be forwarded to the North East MPs' Forum and can collectively share it with the Prime Minister as well.



Summary of Proceedings
Shri Amba Jamir
Vice President, IMI

Shri Amba Jamir highlighted the following points from the session:

- One recurring point was the recognition that the pandemic is a big challenge, one beyond the scope of the mountain states to handle alone.
- There was a recommendation that mountain states need to collectively reach out to the Centre to request for a special provision for mountain states to ensure that vaccinations are done properly and more extensively (especially in remote areas) in the mountain states.
- We also need to look into the adequacy of existing infrastructure in the states to manage the vaccines - transport, storage, etc. before the vaccinations are rolled out.
- We need to look into and encourage more research into the knowledge systems such as traditional food, indigenous medicines, etc. , not just to look into how these are being utilized to locally manage the pandemic but also to feed into tourism.
- Inclusive growth is needed to tackle the big challenge of mental health and depression among youth.
- There is a need to bring in synergy among different sectors as currently policies are being made in silos.
- A request emerged for all mountain states to collectively work towards a roadmap or policy towards tourism recovery in the Himalayas.
- The other big challenge everyone in the mountains is facing is how to ensure that returnees have appropriate livelihoods and how to engage them in meaningful jobs.
- A lot of opportunities are emerging through digital movement but the issue of connectivity keeps coming up. If we really want to capitalise on the digital movement we must first tackle infrastructure and connectivity issues for which we must talk to the Centre.
- Online tourism is also coming up in a big way. A good example is that of the Hornbill Festival which is being organized online due to Covid-19.
- An innovative idea to bring in new tourism destinations but where the question here is how do we bring in funds to encourage local communities.
- The other issue highlighted was that we now need to look at global outreach - NRIs and foreign tourists who are looking for new tourism places.
- There was an agreement among the legislators that there should be special economic package for mountain tourism based on natural resources and rural tourism.



Vote of thanks

Dr Rajendra Dobhal

Chairman, SDFU & Vice President, IMI

Dr Rajendra Dobhal thanked Shri Vicent Pala for Chairing this session of MLM 2020. He thanked Prof Srinath Reddy for bringing in data relevant to the mountain states of India which further enhanced the understanding of the multi-dimensional issues of the pandemic. He also thanked Shri Hari Nair for bringing in innovative ideas and policies which can be taken forward for recovery. Dr Dobhal further thanked all the former and current elected representatives who attended the session and engaged with the discussions through their relevant questions, and ensured everyone that the recommendations will be taken forward through a collective effort.

Annexure 1: Attendees

Name	Designation
Agatha Sangma	MP (Lok Sabha), Meghalaya
Amar Singh Rai	Former MLA, West Bengal
Amba Jamir	Vice President, IMI
C Lairosanga	MP (Lok Sabha), Mizoram
D.R. Thapa	MLA, Sikkim
Dr Lorho Pfoze	MP (Lok Sabha), Manipur
Dr Rajendra Dobhal	Vice President, IMI & Chairman, SDFU
Dr Rohit Sharma	MLA, West Bengal
Dr Skaizang Dorjey	Chairman, Block Development Council, Leh
Farwanti Tamang	MLA, Sikkim
Feroz Ahmed Khan	Chairman, LAHDC Kargil
Gabriel D Wangsu	MLA, Arunachal Pradesh
Hari Nair	Founder, Holiday IQ
Himalaya Shangpliang	MLA, Meghalaya
Jitendra Chaudhury	Former MP, Tripura
K Srinath Reddy	President, Public Health Foundation of India
Kishore Upadhyay	Former MLA, Uttarakhand
Lainunmawia Fanai	MLA, Mizoram
Pachhuga Khenglwat	MLA, Mizoram
PD Rai	President, IMI
Pramod Reang	MLA, Tripura
Pravat Chowdhury	MLA, Tripura
Punchok Tashi	Executive Councilor, LAHDC Kargil
Pushpesh Tripathi	MLA, Uttarakhand
Raj Kumari Thapa	MLA, Sikkim
Rakkam Sangma	MLA, Meghalaya
Rigzin Spalbar	Former Chairman, LAHDC Leh
Rinchen Dolkar	
Ritu Kanduri Bhushan	MLA, Uttarakhand
Sonam T Venchungpa	MLA, Sikkim
Syuhio Mara	Mara Autonomous District Council
Tashi Gyaisan	Chairman, LAHDC Leh
Vanlalthiana	MLA, Mizoram
Vincent Pala	MP (Lok Sabha), Meghalaya



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