

Issue Brief

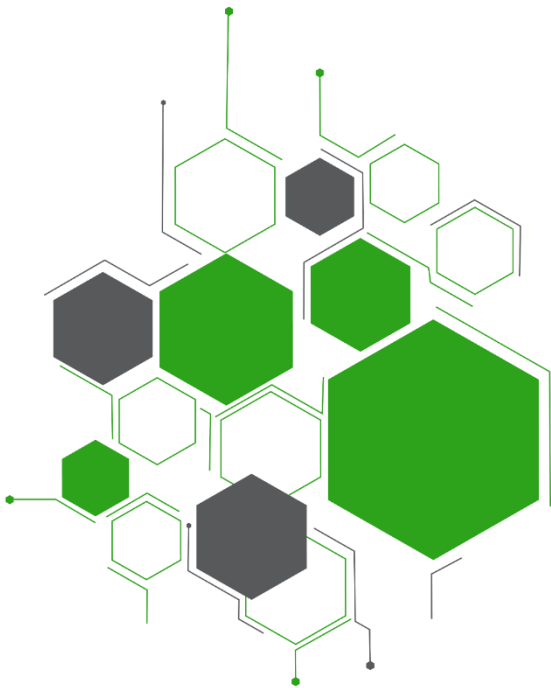
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Strong Think-tank or Soft Intergovernmental Forum? Why ICIMOD Must Adopt a 'Diplomacy for Science' Framework

Aishwarya Sanas



About the Author: Aishwarya Sanas is a PhD scholar at the Department of International Relations and Governance Studies, Shiv Nadar University, Delhi-NCR. Her thesis, 'Thawing Politics: Himalayan International Relations, Glacier Knowledge Industry and Glacial Identities', looks at epistemic politics within glaciological knowledge production in the Hindu Kush-Karakoram-Himalaya. Her research integrates historical and contemporary dynamics of glacier science, the scientific institutions working on the region, and environmental politics around glaciers in India. It also brings insights from critical political ecology into International Relations and is situated within the context of increasing global awareness on glacier melting and the growing demand for knowledge in policymaking.

Aishwarya can be contacted at as167@snu.edu.in, X: @Aishwarya_721.

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Centre of Excellence for Himalayan Studies
School of Humanities and Social Sciences
Shiv Nadar Institution of Eminence
NH-91, Tehsil Dadri, Gautam Budh Nagar District
Uttar Pradesh - 201314, India
Ph: +91 120 7170100
E-Mail: chs.shss@snu.edu.in
Website: <https://chs.snu.edu.in>

Strong Think-tank or Soft Intergovernmental Forum? Why ICIMOD Must Adopt a 'Diplomacy for Science' Framework

Aishwarya Sanas

Abstract

The International Centre for Integrated Mountain Development (ICIMOD) is the primary intergovernmental forum for environmental governance in the Hindu Kush-Karakoram-Himalaya (HKH). By analysing some of ICIMOD's past and ongoing engagements with regional governments, this Issue Brief argues that the organisation's strategy of participatory, iterative engagement, and creation of complex interdependencies across the region has positioned it as a think-tank or a soft intergovernmental forum due to its preoccupation with local projects concentrated in the smaller states (Bhutan and Nepal) and limited engagement with bigger powers (India and China). This organizational approach comes at the expense of a genuinely transnational epistemology and governance. The article concludes by advancing a diplomacy for science framework that would allow for the closer integration of scientific cooperation with formal diplomatic mechanisms. Such an approach is necessary for building a genuinely transnational epistemology and enabling effective, region-wide environmental governance in the HKH.

Keywords: Hindu Kush-Karakoram-Himalaya (HKH); ICIMOD; regional cooperation; environmental governance; science diplomacy; transboundary ecosystems; climate change; geopolitics

The International Centre for Integrated Mountain Development (ICIMOD) has a long history of engagement with local partners and stakeholders across the Himalaya and beyond. In recent years, for instance, the organisation has signed agreements with a number of Indian research institutes and think-tanks. These include MoUs with the National Institute for Urban Affairs signed in November 2023 (NIUA 2023), Development Alternatives in June 2024 (ICIMOD 2024), a joint agreement with The Energy and Resources Institute, Balipara Foundation, and Gauhati University in March 2025 (NKTV Digital 2025), with the Indian Institute of Technology, Roorkee in May 2025 (IITR 2025), and the India Foundation in August 2025 (India Foundation 2025). They cover a range of areas of potential collaboration such as climate-risk assessment, adaptation planning, policy advocacy and leadership building. Under ICIMOD's wider strategy of regional engagement, such nationally influential think-tanks are a potential route for providing policy advice to governments on matters of environmental and climate change.

Yet, persistent tensions lie in the larger structure of regional cooperation in the Hindu Kush-Karakoram-Himalaya (HKH). Agreements between regional countries for addressing concerns related to water management, hazard preparedness, climate adaptation, and community resilience across the HKH system often fail to materialise on ground, solidify through diplomatic channels, or sustain themselves under geopolitical pressures. These tensions highlight a structural limitation in the regional cooperation model prevalent across the HKH and warrants critical examination.

ICIMOD holds great significance in terms of its role in regional cooperation due to its extensive knowledge resources and in-house technical expertise, deeply entrenched institutional networks, and global position. Since its inception, the organisation has maintained an intentional separation of its scientific efforts from the region's geopolitical faultlines in the hope that scientific cooperation would foster regionalism (ICIMOD 2025). However, this approach has limitations for achieving its intended objectives. By analysing

some of ICIMOD's past and ongoing engagements with regional governments, this article argues that the organisation's strategy of participatory, iterative engagement and creation of complex interdependencies across the region has positioned it as a think-tank or a soft intergovernmental forum due to its preoccupation with local projects concentrated in the smaller states (Bhutan and Nepal) and limited engagement with bigger powers (India and China); all at the expense of a genuinely transnational epistemology and governance. Finally, the article makes a case for rethinking such a 'science without diplomacy' model adopted by ICIMOD, in favour of a close integration of diplomacy and scientific cooperation through a 'diplomacy for science' framework, to enable effective cooperation and environmental governance.

Regional Cooperation for Addressing Environmental and Climate Change Concerns

The 3,500 km-long high-altitude mountain system of the HKH is a contiguous stretch of young fold mountains that are tectonically active and composed of loose, grainy sediments embedded in sedimentary and metamorphic rocks, which makes them also geologically fragile. Moreover, it is the largest repository of snow and ice outside the poles, a major source of freshwater, and one of the most densely inhabited and population-dependent mountain landscapes in the world. Under increasing pressures from developmental activities and the changing climate, the region is experiencing extreme impacts affecting the lives and livelihoods of mountain communities and of downstream populations, its rich biodiversity, and infrastructure development and hydropower potential.

Addressing these ecological and development challenges require a region-wide solution and cannot be solved by individual nation-states alone due to the essentially transboundary nature of its causes and effects. It also requires a robust system of collaborative scientific research and regionally coordinated science policy (Singh and Thadani 2015). However, scientific regional cooperation has been fraught with sensitive bilateral ties and recurring border tensions. Historical wounds and contemporary geopolitical dilemmas have dominated the entire mountain system (Singh et al. 2025). As a result, regional cooperation has remained abysmally weak and, despite occasional progress through bilateral agreements, has largely stagnated over the years (Yashwant 2024). Furthermore, political organisations like South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation and South Asian Cooperative Environmental Programme have failed to represent the collective concerns of mountain ecosystems and societies (Sanas 2024). In this context, ICIMOD has shown remarkable endurance and a continuing, but quiet, presence in the region.

ICIMOD

ICIMOD is the primary intergovernmental forum representing the collective interests of the HKH region. Although the eight member countries, India, China, Pakistan, Bhutan, Nepal, Afghanistan, Bangladesh, and Myanmar rarely coalesce, they still group together under ICIMOD's roof for achieving an ambitious goal of protecting 'mountain communities and ecosystems.'

The origins of ICIMOD date back to a 1974 international workshop on the development of mountain environment hosted by the German Foundation for International Development, in Munich, Germany. As a result of subsequent meetings, the idea for an autonomous international centre dedicated to the HKH was conceptualised in 1981 through an agreement between the Government of Nepal and UNESCO (UNESCO 1984). The former offered to host this centre, with support from the governments of Germany and Switzerland. Since its formal establishment in 1983, ICIMOD has become a valued member among international environmental organisations. It has also undergone significant shifts in its leadership from being largely externally-led to becoming a more regionally-driven institution. Despite this,

international partners in the form of independent board and support group members, such as United Nations bodies, Mountain Research Initiative, Stockholm Environment Institute, Norwegian Agency for Development Cooperation, Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation, etc., still command a significant share of the organisation's intellectual and institutional momentum.

ICIMOD positions itself as an 'apolitical' and 'neutral organisation' dedicated to knowledge generation and coordination of collective action for the benefit of mountain communities and ecosystems. It adopts a participatory iterative process by bringing together policy actors, scientific experts, local community leaders, private actors such as NGOs, and international partners. Through frameworks of 'science for diplomacy' and 'science in diplomacy' (The Royal Society 2025), ICIMOD provides a platform for regional countries to kick-start dialogue on identified issue-areas, supplies the required knowledge inputs through regional information systems, and encourages them to deepen engagement by organising workshops, annual regional meetings, and conferences. To support member countries in formulating policy responses, it generates knowledge tools for collective use and offers training to scientists through institutional partnerships.

ICIMOD's strategic areas of focus include water, air, cryosphere, economies, landscapes, and livelihoods. The organisation also engages in advocacy in the region as well as globally and in science communication through major publications (e.g. HI-WISE) and public awareness campaigns (e.g. Save Our Snow). It serves as an interface connecting regional governments to external investors. For example, the HI-REAP (Himalayan Resilience-Enabling Action Programme) project connects the UK government and Bangladesh, Bhutan, India and Nepal, and China.¹

Although ICIMOD's programmes carry significant consequences for the regional environment, its strategy for promoting scientific cooperation is deeply shaped by the larger geopolitics of the region. The neutral, voluntary, and apolitical posture, as innovative and ingenious as it may seem, is itself a product of the lack of trust among member countries. The neutrality posture is an act of boundary-making (Guston 2000), signalling an objective separation between science and politics to the regional states; thereby insulating environmental threats from concerns of high-security, positing the possibility of scientific and environmental cooperation despite unresolved political tensions. ICIMOD's location in Nepal may hold certain advantages, such as a favourable buffer between India and China, geographical proximity to the mountain system, and opportunities for international involvement. However, the looming presence of political and economic blockades, financial sanctions, and withdrawal from ongoing projects, continually hinder its operational and structural functioning, limiting its ability to deliver its objectives. Thus, ICIMOD's neutrality might be a tactical and strategic means to preserve its legitimacy and relevance, but this model has largely constrained its ability to foster a strong regional identity, drive scientific collaboration and durable agreements, and has reinforced a status quo in the environmental governance of the region.

Regional Programmes

The River Basins Initiative is among the several programmes spearheaded by ICIMOD. The Indus Basin Initiative was launched in 2013 for building cohesive strategies for understanding and managing water resources of the Indus River Basin. As part of the project, the Upper Indus Basin Network (UIB-N) was created in 2014 as a 'voluntary and neutral knowledge and research network.' It initially focused on Gilgit-Baltistan, later extending to all riparian countries, including Afghanistan, China, India, and Pakistan. Its primary objective was to develop mechanisms for regional cooperation through information sharing, workshops, regular meetings, and institutional networks so that riparian countries could better understand the impacts of climate and related changes in the cryospheric and cryo-

hydrological regime of the Indus and plan coordinated adaptation strategies. Under this initiative, the Indus Forum and the Indus Data Portal were also established with the expectation that collaboration would enhance the regional knowledge base and improved knowledge would naturally drive regional cooperation.²

However, a closer look at the programme outcomes reveals a different story. The three-tier governance framework comprising Regional Annual Meetings, Regional Strategic Committee, and Country Chapters appear to work independently in national contexts serving distinct priorities with hardly any cross-border engagement (Shrestha et al. 2021). Most of the ongoing projects under the UIB-N still appear to be limited to Hunza Valley in Pakistan Occupied Kashmir, with assistance from China. Although the government of Afghanistan expressed its willingness to work with the network, there are no public reports of actual work happening on the ground. The India Chapter's contribution has largely been confined to initiating a special issue in a journal focusing on the Indus River Basin (Dimri et al. 2021).

Over the course of UIB-N's operations from 2013 to the present, several mechanisms for regional dialogue and engagement have been put in place and meetings with scientists and private actors have been held, but these have not yielded actual transnational collaboration, government-to-government involvement, or collective research projects. Instances of co-authored scientific publications between scientists from riparian countries of the basin are rare. While organisational reports on the Initiative claim to have achieved "notable progress" owing to its continuity, such continuity of meetings and workshops hardly depicts progress since in practice, historic bilateral agreements such as the Indus Waters Treaty of 1960 have crumbled (Bhattacharjee et al. 2025) and research cooperation in the form of access to data (Ghosh and Modak 2025) and research sites over the Indus continues to be restricted.

Similarly, ICIMOD initiated the Transboundary Landscapes regional programme in 2013 for establishing conservation corridors across national territories by bringing global knowledge on Other Effective Area-based Conservation Measures to the region.³ The programme was centred on the landscape/ecosystem as the main unit transcending political borders and adopted techniques of community-based conservation for the sustainable use of natural resources. Its objective was to work with governments and conservation organisations for co-identifying potential sites, providing policy support to national governments and developing a regional cooperation framework. Moreover, ICIMOD also conducted extensive local-level surveys and feasibility studies, identified lead institutions, and consulted international stakeholders. After joint consultations, six transboundary landscapes were identified, the first of which to be operationalised was the Kailash Sacred Landscape Initiative, among India, China, and Nepal. Hailed as a 'sacred pact', it was hoped that the Initiative would set the tone for future collaboration in the HKH.⁴

Of the six, only four eventually became operational (Kotru et al. 2020). Despite these corridors having been created through agreements at the highest level of relevant regional governments, there were several legislative and bureaucratic gaps that hindered conservation from being transboundary in its truest sense. Thus, not all objectives mentioned on paper were met on ground. For instance, a major objective of these corridors revolved around governments co-evolving common conservation goals, recognising rights of indigenous peoples and local communities irrespective of borders, facilitating in-situ conservation of biodiversity, and managing human-wildlife conflict. But instead, governments continued to operate through distinct conservation and management practices, as seen in the case of the Kanchenjunga Transboundary Corridor (Gurung et al. 2019). As far as the Kailash Initiative (2011-2017) was concerned, it faced challenges due to numerous data sharing restrictions, overlapping jurisdictions, fragmented decision-making, and inconsistencies in statutory regimes regarding protected areas in the countries involved.

Both the programmes highlighted above, adopting ‘basins’ and ‘ecosystems’ as the unit for governance, emerge from a transnational frame. Although they have served their respective terms and delivered operational output, they have also faced challenges in fulfilling their intended objectives.

Cross-border Research and Transnational Epistemology

The problem with HKH scientific cooperation is not just about the deficit of data but a deeper deficit of cross-border collaboration, essential for building a genuinely regional and transnational epistemology. Joint research between scientists from India and Pakistan is next to none, and between India and China, very limited (Goodale et al. 2021). Nepal (Rana et al. 2022) has been the principal collaborator in the region, but most of its research ties are with extra-regional actors such as Australia, Canada, Germany, the United Kingdom and the United States (Haq et al. 2022). Moreover, collaborations outside ICIMOD’s initiatives are rare (Mukul et al. 2025). Since most of these initiatives adopt a flexible, external funded, and volunteer-based institutional mechanism, progress is slow and outcomes are minimal where simply the gathering of regional members sometimes amounts to success.

Much of present-day Himalayan research in the region is nationally siloed. Research in Bhutan, Pakistan and Nepal is largely driven by international projects and external funds given their limited capacities and higher vulnerabilities. India and China both possess significant scientific capacities and their Himalayan research has been largely developed independently, guided by national priorities. In India, the Geological Survey of India, the Govind Ballabh Pant Institute of Himalayan Environment and Development, and several other research institutions, through national missions drive Himalayan research. In China, meanwhile, the Chinese Academy of Sciences, the China Meteorological Administration, and other institutes conduct research framed by imperatives such as the Tibetan Plateau Region and the Belt and Road Initiative (Zhang 2022). Moreover, being major powers, the two countries are more likely to perceive ICIMOD as a forum with limited functions and, as a result, have not engaged with ICIMOD to the extent that their regional profiles would suggest. Thus, cross-border engagement across all HKH states has remained limited to episodic, fixed-term, institution-level partnerships without getting promoted to diplomatic and high-level policy cooperation.

Towards a ‘diplomacy for science’ Framework

The analysis of ICIMOD’s various programmes makes it evident that the organisation faces several limitations in achieving its intended objectives. Both the basin and landscape centric approach of the organisation highlight the lack of ‘collective and synchronised’ commitment of the members and of ‘transboundary-ness’ in ICIMOD’s programmes. What has been intended as a transboundary solution has devolved into ‘country-based assignments’ (Singh 2018). Moreover, although voluntary scientific networks have stimulated dialogue, built some trust, and encouraged social learning, in the absence of government-to-government agreements, they have remained time-bound and ceased after the completion of the project tenure. Cross-border research and policy-making has been minimal.

ICIMOD’s strategy of regional engagement can be described as science devoid of diplomacy. Such a strategy has placed constraints on its own functioning, translating into both tactical and strategic inefficiencies in regional environmental knowledge generation and coordinated policy action. Thus, what had begun as an intergovernmental forum is now essentially just a think-tank providing policy advice to governments through institutional partnerships, fostering local-national-regional-global networks, and liaising between global investors and local beneficiaries.

Instead of a science without diplomacy model, regional environmental cooperation in the HKH needs a diplomacy for science framework in which ICIMOD can play a constructive role by using its expertise to train diplomats and drive a region-level treaty on cross-border research and policy-making even allowing for the fact that the high levels of distrust between the regional states make this infeasible in the short-term. Given ICIMOD's presence in the region and its existing networks, it could use this approach to add a new component to its governance structure, catering to engagement with foreign affairs, defence, environment, and science-related departments of regional governments. It could also advocate for and negotiate scientific mobility, active declassification of data for research, sharing research outputs and scientific instruments, organise joint field expeditions, and create a regional fund for HKH research. ICIMOD, thus, could offer to lay the groundwork of a treaty, providing holistic and integrated environmental governance for the region. This might be the next best solution available to the region, especially as past attempts by individual states to forge regional agreements such as the Himalayan Science Council attempted by India in 2013, for example, have failed (Nayak 2023).

It could be argued that the ICIMOD's strategy of keeping science and politics separate has served a pivotal role in shaping its credibility as a neutral actor and consolidating its identity in the initial decades of its formation. However, such an approach has outlived its utility. To be sure, given accelerating climate change impacts and developmental activities across the region, ICIMOD's role in producing knowledge tools and regional solutions today is unparalleled. Nevertheless, without concrete diplomatic channels for engagement with the HKH countries, the organisation will be effectively swimming against the tide without an anchor. It is, therefore, high-time it adopts a diplomacy for science framework that embeds scientific cooperation within formal diplomatic structures and region-wide agreements to enable effective governance. In the disruptive times of the present, science or knowledge alone cannot drive regionalism. Given the current state of regional environmental governance in the HKH, leveraging the ICIMOD's institutional prowess, combined with a diplomacy for science approach, may be the most effective and feasible political choice for all stakeholders.

ENDNOTES

[1] For more information on ICIMOD's programmes and mission statements, refer to ICIMOD's website 'About us' page at <https://www.icimod.org/>

[2] For information of the Indus Basin Network and its operations, refer to ICIMOD's website 'Indus Basin Initiative' page at <https://www.icimod.org/initiative/indus-basin-initiative/>

[3] Read the International Union for Conservation of Nature's philosophy on Other Effective Area-based Conservation Measures (OEMCs) at <https://iucn.org/our-work/topic/effective-protected-areas/our-philosophy-protected-and-conserved-areas/oecms>

[4] For information of Transboundary Landscapes regional programme, refer to ICIMOD's website 'Transboundary Landscapes' page at <https://www.icimod.org/regional-programme/transboundary-landscapes/>

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