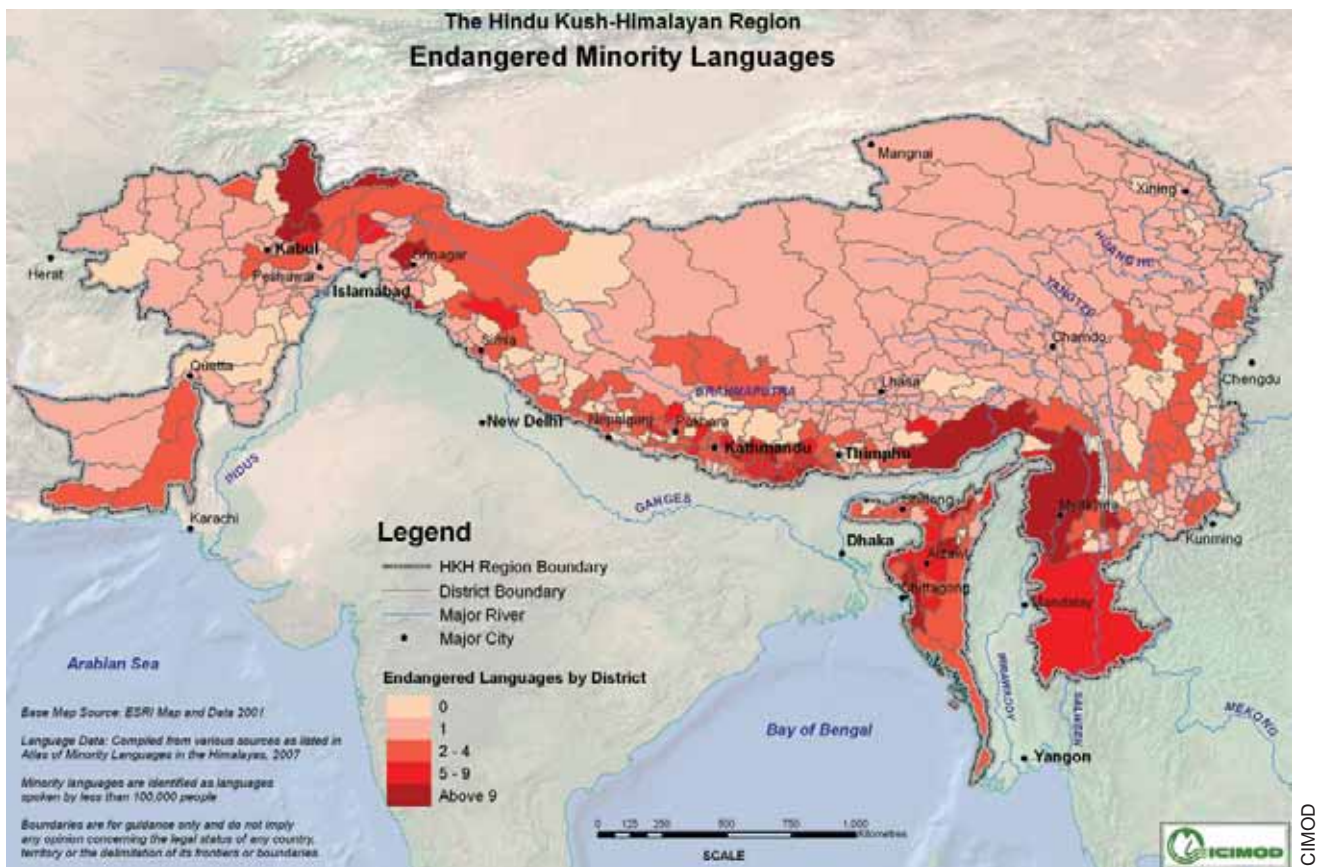


# A Multitude of Mountain Voices

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Distribution of endangered minority languages in the Hindu Kush-Himalayan region

**The greater Himalayan region sustains over 150 million people and is home to many of Asia's most endangered languages. Moving across the region, Afghanistan boasts 47 living languages, Bangladesh is home to 39, Bhutan has 24, China 235, India 415, Myanmar 108, Nepal 123, and Pakistan 72** (Ethnologue 2005, online edition).

The Himalayan region is included in the 34 biodiversity 'mega centres' or 'hotspots' of the world. But since this stretch of mountainous Asia is also home to one-sixth of all human languages, it should be thought of as a linguistic and cultural 'mega centre' as well.

According to the most conservative projections, at least half of the world's 6,500 languages will become extinct in the next century. While the documentation of endangered mother tongues has traditionally been the domain of academic linguists and anthropologists, international awareness about this impending socio-cultural catastrophe is growing, and development organisations are becoming involved in the struggle to preserve spoken forms. The death of a language marks the loss of yet another piece of cultural uniqueness and inalienable heritage from the mosaic of our diverse planet, and is therefore a loss for all of humanity. Language death is often compared to species extinction,

and the same metaphors of preservation and diversity can be invoked to canvas support for biodiversity as well as language documentation and preservation programmes.

Over the last two years, ICIMOD's Culture, Equity, Gender and Governance (CEGG) Programme has been investigating the interrelation between linguistic diversity and biodiversity, and how these issues correlate to the Centre's mandate to improve the sustainable livelihoods of mountain peoples in the extended Himalayan region. In this short article, I provide an overview of the three main language-related projects in which CEGG has recently been engaged.

## Mapping linguistic diversity

Recent international research points to an intriguing correlation: language diversity appears to be inversely



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A student doing her Lepcha homework by candlelight in North Sikkim, India: the teaching of local vernaculars in school is encouraging and gives symbolic value to the mother tongue, even if it does not ensure verbal proficiency.

related to latitude, and areas rich in languages also tend to be rich in ecology and species. Both biodiversity and linguistic diversity are concentrated between the tropics in inaccessible mountainous environments such as the Himalayas, while diversity of all forms decrease in deserts.

Building on ICIMOD's strengths in mapping and in conceptualising all forms of diversity, we prepared an interactive digital atlas of endangered languages of the Himalayan region to test the above hypothesis. Do endangered languages indeed cluster in areas of geographical inaccessibility? Which districts of the Himalayan region are most linguistically diverse? And how does ethno-linguistic diversity correlate with biodiversity hotspots?

Working with publicly available data on the distribution of Himalayan languages and their alleged levels of endangerment, we constructed a database of all mother tongues used in the Himalayan region with less than 100,000 speakers. This process isolated 415 languages which lie at some point on the continuum between comparable safe and moribund. With support from MENRIS, an interactive digital mapping tool using Scalable Vector Graphics (SVG) was designed and developed. The tool allows the users to search and retrieve data on endangered mother tongues spoken in the Himalayan region. The central interface is a scalable, zoomable map of all mountainous administrative units of the ICIMOD member countries, onto which cities and rivers can be overlaid. Users can select from a list of language families, or from

individual languages, and see in which districts they are spoken. More information about each language and its distribution, the number of speakers, and its endangered status are provided in colour tabs. We hope that this visually-rich language mapping tool will help those involved in development, advocacy, and policy to get an accurate picture of the distribution of endangered minority languages in the region. The CD is presently in production, and the online version will be hosted at <http://www.icimod.org>.

### Linguistic Diversity and the Preservation of Endangered Languages: A Case Study from Nepal

The first addition to ICIMOD's *Talking Points* series in 2007 will be a short monograph with the above title. The *Talking Points* series contains short presentations of topical, controversial, or problematic themes where general consensus has not yet been reached or where action may be appropriate. The series is intended to stimulate thought and discussion.

The discussion paper situates language in its social context, specifically within Nepal, but in general across the greater Himalayan region. Language rights and access to education in one's mother tongue are fundamental aspects of sustainable livelihoods, all the more so when the languages and communities who speak them are under threat. In this issue of *Talking Points*, I begin by discussing the linguistic diversity of Nepal in the frame of wider debates about diversity of all forms, and move on to situate language in the context

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of ecology, the state, the legal system, the national census, the media, the education sector, gender, the Maoist insurgency, and finally, culture. The last section is devoted to comparative examples from other states in the Himalayan region and to an analysis of government institutions and non-government organisations that are supporting linguistic rights in Nepal. Throughout, the frame of reference has been to position language in the context of wider social and cultural issues.

It is intended that policy makers will benefit from an increased appreciation of the complexity of the ethnolinguistic fabric of modern Nepal on the ground, and that scholars will pause for a moment to reflect on the formation and implementation of suitable policy. Alongside a print edition, this paper will be available for download from: <http://www.icimod.org/home/pub/publications.php?pcid=2>

### A linguistic survey of Sikkim

In collaboration with the Namgyal Institute of Tibetology, and with financial and institutional support from ICIMOD, we are conducting the first modern linguistic survey of the State of Sikkim. The survey has three main objectives:

- (i) to compile an inventory of all of the languages spoken in Sikkim
- (ii) to determine the geographical distribution of each language spoken as a mother tongue in this Himalayan state through a 30-question survey form distributed to school children at every secondary school in the state
- (iii) to estimate the number of speakers of each language on the basis of disaggregated census data, roof counts and on-site field investigation, and to collect accurate GPS readings of the locations where languages are spoken

A baseline linguistic survey of a state is an essential requirement for planning language policy in education, media, and the public sphere. Detailed linguistic surveys have been conducted in Nepal (1986) and Bhutan (1991), the findings of which have augmented rudimentary data already available from national census bureaus. Building on data already in the public domain, the linguistic survey field team travelled to the four districts of Sikkim to visit local schools and

administrative offices in order to better understand the complex linguistic reality of the Sikkimese state. While the detailed results of this survey will be published at a later date, four preliminary findings can already be made.

First, the spread of Nepali is far more extensive than expected, and aside from several Lepcha and Bhutia students from more traditional families, the vast majority of students now speak Nepali in almost all situations.

Second, the issue of self-ascribed mother tongue is politically charged and, in certain circumstances, may be more of an ancestral ethnic label than an indication of spoken competence or fluency. In some cases, students offered a language which they themselves did not even speak as their mother tongue.

Third, the mother tongues of the communities whose ancestors came from Nepal are particularly under threat: most of their descendants no longer speak Gurung, Newar, and Tamang, only Nepali.

Fourth, the teaching of local vernaculars as subjects in school is very encouraging and helps give symbolic value to the mother tongue, even if this does not ensure spoken proficiency.

Through these interlinked research projects, ICIMOD's CEGG programme is exploring ways to introduce a layer of programmatic support for projects focused on linguistic and cultural diversity. Only by understanding and embracing diversity at all levels will we be able to build sustainable mountain societies that enhance equity and empower marginalised mountain people across the Himalayan region.

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