



## DECODE South Asia Webinar Report

### Foods from the Forest

Bridging traditional knowledge, science, and sustainability in the Himalayan mountains of India

April 3, 2025



University  
of Victoria

UNESCO Chair in Community Based  
Research and Social Responsibility  
in Higher Education



PRIA



unesco  
Chair



IDRC • CRDI

International Development Research Centre  
Centre de recherches pour le développement international

Canada

## 1. General information about the Webinar

- **Date and time:** 3 April 11:00 am to 12:30 pm (IST)
- **DECODE Project South Asia Regional Team:** Dr. Rajesh Tandon, Dr. Anshuman Karol, Gauri Khanna
- **Speakers**
  - **Dr Rajesh Tandon**, Founder President, PRIA, Co-director of the DECODE project and UNESCO Co-Chair in Community Research and Social Responsibility in Higher Education
  - **Mr Shailesh Panwar**, Chief Functionary, Himalayan Action Research Centre (HARC), India
  - **Ms Bhavani Devi**, Member, HARC Alaknanda Krishi Vyavsaya Bahudeshya Swayatt Sahkarita (HAKVBSS), Chamoli, Uttarakhand, India
  - **Ms Sarojini Devi**, Member, Member, HAKVBSS, Chamoli, Uttarakhand, India
  - **Ms Rekha Devi**, Member, Member, HAKVBSS, Chamoli, Uttarakhand, India
  - **Mr Ganesh Uniyal**, Secretary, Member, HAKVBSS, Chamoli, Uttarakhand, India
  - **Dr Dyutiman Choudhary**, Senior Scientist, Sustainable Agrifood Systems Program of the International Maize and Wheat Improvement Centre (CIMMYT), Nepal (Formerly with ICIMOD, Nepal)
  - **Prof Paula Banerjee**, IDRC Endowed Research Chair on Gender and Forced Displacement, Asian Institute of Technology, Bangkok
  - **Dr Arjan de Haan**, Climate Specialist at Canada's International Development Research Centre
  - **Dr Mahendra Singh Kunwar** is founder member and chief advisor of Himalayan Action Research Centre (HARC), India
- **Moderator- Dr Anshuman Karol**, Lead- Governance and Climate Action, PRIA, India

- **Number of participants:** Registered - 259, Attended – 108 (from 13 countries including India, Nepal, Bangladesh, British India Ocean Territory, Canada, USA, UK, Malaysia, South Africa, Kenya, Uganda, Rwanda and Mexico)

**South Asian Webinar DECODE**

Explore insights from the DECODE project, featuring global case studies and the Indian case study  
*Food from Forest - Bridging Tradition, Science & Sustainability in the Himalayas*

**PANELISTS**



Dr. Rajesh Tandon  
PSIA  
UNESCO Co-Chair, ICRR & SRI-E



Dr. Arjan de Haan  
IDRC, Canada



Dr. Paula Banerjee  
ICRC Endowed Chair Professor



Dr. Mahindra Singh Kunwar  
HARC



Dr. Dyuiman Choudhary  
CIMMYT



Mr. Shalish Panwar  
HARC

**CO-OPERATIVE LEADERS, HARC**



Ms. Bhavani Devi



Ms. Sarojini Devi



Ms. Rekha Devi



Mr. Ganesh Uniyal

**MODERATOR**



Dr. Anshuman Karol  
PRIA



**APRIL 03, 2025**  
THURSDAY

**11AM - 12:30PM**

**WORKING PAPER #2**  
SUMMARISING KEY FINDINGS

**THE DECODE KNOWLEDGE PROJECT**

THE DECODE PROJECT (COMMUNICATION, MONITORING & IMPLEMENTATION) HIGHLIGHTS CRITICAL INTERACTIONS AND THE IMPORTANCE OF LOCAL KNOWLEDGE. "KNOWLEDGE WAS ALWAYS SYSTEMATIZED". COMMUNITY-BASED PARTICIPATORY RESEARCH CASE STUDIES FOCUSED ON UNDERSTANDING COMMUNITY AND/OR INDIGENOUS KNOWLEDGE USED TO ADDRESS CLIMATE CHANGE ISSUES AND DEVELOP CLIMATE RESILIENCE.

## 2. Webinar Overview

The South Asian webinar, part of the DECODE Knowledge project, provided an invaluable opportunity to share emerging lessons and case studies derived from the ongoing research initiative. This project, spearheaded by the UNESCO Chair in Community-Based Research and Social Responsibility in Higher Education- is bolstered by the collaborative efforts of the University of Victoria's Centre for Global Studies and Participatory Research in Asia (PRIA), with funding from the International Development Research Centre (IDRC) in Canada.

During the webinar, we were introduced to an inspiring example of community-driven success through HARC- Alaknanda Krishi Vyavsaya Bahudeshya Swayatt Sahkarita (HAKVBSS), a women-led cooperative that has made remarkable strides in establishing sustainable livelihoods for women in the mountainous regions of Uttarakhand, India.

This initiative serves as a compelling case study within the DECODE Knowledge Project, highlighting the potential of community co-management- grounded in traditional knowledge and values to promote sustainable practices, enhance climate resilience, and empower women.

Since its inception in January 2024, the DECODE Knowledge Project has successfully documented and systematized over 15 months of community-led participatory research. The primary goal is to catalogue grassroots initiatives focused on climate resilience and sustainability.

Globally, a great number of grassroots movements are taking place, often leveraging local knowledge and sometimes collaborating with academic institutions. Unfortunately, many of these valuable efforts go unrecorded or lack structured dissemination. The Himalayan case study from India represents one of six important case studies compiled alongside initiatives from the Arctic Inuit region (Canada), as well as endeavours from Western Canada, Colombia, Northern Uganda, and Malaysia. By sharing these stories, the DECODE Project aims to inspire and facilitate further progress in community-driven sustainability efforts.

### Webinar Agenda

11:00 AM	Welcome & Housekeeping Dr. Anshuman Karol
11:05 AM	Introducing the DECODE Knowledge Project Dr. Rajesh Tandon
11:20 AM	Presentation of Indian Case Study Mr. Shailesh Panwar, Himalayan Action Research Centre (HARC), India Ms. Bhavani Devi, HARC Alaknanda Krishi Bahuudeshiya Swayat Sehkarita (HAKVBSS) Ms. Sarojini Devi, HAKVBSS Ms. Rekha Devi, HAKVBSS Mr. Ganesh Uniyal, HAKVBSS

11:45 PM	Discussants Dr. Dyutiman Choudhary, CIMMYT, Nepal Prof. Paula Banerjee, Asian Institute of Technology, Thailand Dr. Arjan de Haan, International Development Research Centre, Canada
12:15 PM	Questions from the audience
12:25 PM	Closing Remarks: Dr. Mahendra Singh Kunwar, HARC, India
12:30 PM	Webinar ends

### 3. Welcome Introduction

The webinar commenced with a warm welcome by the moderator Dr Anshuman Karol, who set the tone for the session by laying down the agenda and introducing the speakers and panelists from various regions. He outlined the basic housekeeping rules to ensure a respectful and safe virtual environment.



## WHAT IS THE DECODE PROJECT?




**Project being led by:**

- UNESCO Chair for Community-Based Research and Social Responsibility in Higher Education
- Centre for Global Studies, University of Victoria
- Participatory Research in Asia (PRIA)



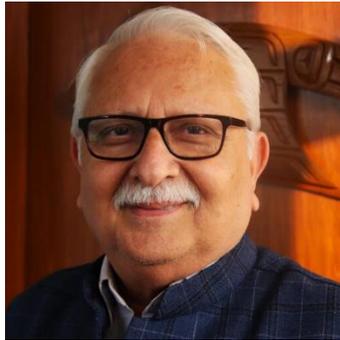



**Funded by:**

- International Development Research Centre (IDRC)




**Dr Rajesh Tandon**



**Dr Rajesh Tandon** is an internationally acclaimed leader and practitioner of participatory research and development. He is Founder-President of Participatory Research in Asia (PRIA), a global centre for participatory research & training. He is also Co-Chair of the UNESCO Chair in Community Based Research and Social Responsibility in Higher Education since 2012. A pioneer of participatory research, Dr. Tandon has given new meaning to academic research by redefining the relationship between the researcher and the researched. He has taught courses on participatory research & democratic governance in several countries, in addition to several universities in India. He has written extensively on participatory research.

Dr. Tandon elaborated on how DECODE challenges the traditional hierarchy of knowledge production and instead promotes horizontal knowledge-sharing. He underscored the role of community-led research Create an open access digital knowledge democracy platform, where DECODE and other experiences in community and/or Indigenous led research can be made available throughout the world.

 <b>FIRST ROUND OF CASE STUDIES</b>		
<u>Tsilhqot'in</u> territories, British Columbia, Canada	Connecting Indigenous-led research through climate, water and health issues	
Sarawak, Malaysia	Modernizing traditional <u>apong</u> production in <u>Samarahan</u>	
<u>Inuit-Nunangat</u> , Arctic	<u>Nanuk</u> Narratives	
<u>Gulu</u> , Uganda	Regenerating Acholi Traditional Knowledge	
<u>Kaleshwar</u> , India	Food from the Forest	
Putumayo, Colombia	Guardians of the Forest	

## Key Insights from the DECODE Case Studies

- 1) Community and Indigenous knowledge are not in conflict with academic knowledge; rather, they can complement and enrich each other. These case studies demonstrate how interactions between community knowledge keepers and academic researchers can effectively work together to achieve research goals.
- 2) Furthermore, Community and Indigenous knowledge encompasses more than just technical know-how. It is deeply rooted in culture, identity, dialect, and spiritual worldviews, all of which promote values of sustainability, conservation, and inclusion. This knowledge is often expressed in local languages and dialects.
- 3) Additionally, the practical needs of the community drive the creation and mobilization of new knowledge. When academic researchers incorporate these needs into shared research objectives, interest in forming partnerships grows. Collaboration between academic institutions and community knowledge keepers is essential, but it can also be complex as it requires; time, trust, and mutual respect to thrive.
- 4) Bridging knowledge cultures is facilitated by various intermediaries that are specific to each context. HARC is one such organization that plays this role.
- 5) Community-based Participatory Research (CBPR) employs methods that are particularly arts-based and culturally appropriate, which support the inclusion of community knowledge throughout the entire research process. This is achieved by creating safe spaces for authentic collaboration.
- 6) A variety of knowledge dissemination methods are used to reach a diverse range of stakeholders. Both academic and popular forms of knowledge sharing are essential for achieving the research objectives established at the outset.
- 7) Women's leadership and knowledge are crucial to community-led initiatives. Women play vital roles as knowledge holders and leaders, particularly in areas such as forest-based livelihoods, agriculture, and natural resource management. When women publicly express their comprehensive understanding of nature—which includes land, forests, water, plants, and animals etc. It transforms gender relations within the community.
- 8) Ownership of knowledge, data, and benefits must be shared equitably, which highlights the importance of co-governance mechanisms—an approach that is beginning to emerge in various contexts. Open discussions and agreements regarding knowledge sharing, ownership, and benefit distribution are essential for building and maintaining trusting partnerships. Ethical conversations about these issues should start at the beginning of the partnership and continue throughout its duration.

- 9) Co-management and co-governance mechanisms between community and academic partners enhances knowledge mobilization and leads to lasting impacts. Community-driven co-management protocols can be effective, even when formal co-governance structures are not yet established.
- 10) The six cases demonstrate that ownership of knowledge, data, and benefits must be shared fairly, necessitating the development of co-governance mechanisms. These mechanisms have begun to appear in several instances. Such research has a significant impact on climate resilience and local livelihoods. Additionally, investing in capacity-building during and after the research process further strengthens and empowers community organizations.

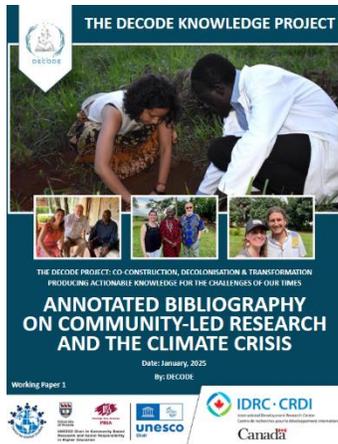
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*“Community or indigenous knowledge is not the enemy of academic knowledge. They can co-exist, learn from each other and build on each other. Community knowledge is more than a Know-how or technical expertise, it is embedded in community culture, community identity and has a spiritual worldview. The way community knowledge is systematised or utilised for practical action depends on their needs and when those needs are also integrated with academic integrated inputs then they become practical solutions for pressing climate issues locally”*

*Dr Rajesh Tandon*

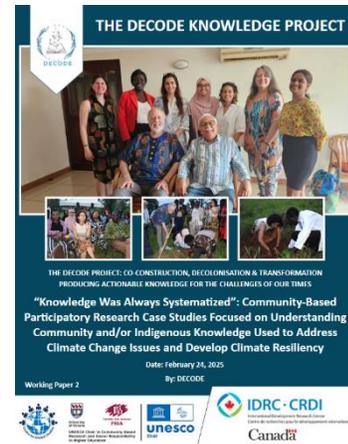
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The participants were informed that all the discussed materials are open access and will be shared with the registered participants. Dr Tandon also shared that two working papers are produced from the ongoing work and encouraged participants to go through these working papers. Link of the working papers is shared with the participants.



WORKING PAPER 1

<https://tinyurl.com/476tuvbm>



WORKING PAPER 2

<https://tinyurl.com/5n8nrs53>

## 1. Case Study Presentation

Following a captivating folk song presentation that celebrated Himalayan ecological traditions. Mr. Shailesh Panwar introduced the **geographical and natural context** of Chamoli District, Uttarakhand—home to HARC (Himalayan Action Research Centre). Situated in the majestic Himalayan ranges, Chamoli is known as the *Abode of the Gods* and boasts a rich historical and cultural heritage. The district is home to sacred pilgrimage sites such as **Badrinath** and is also a globally renowned destination for trekking and hiking. Its remote location near the border of Tibet and distance from major urban centres, (439 km from Delhi and 250 km from Dehradun) adds to its challenges and uniqueness.

Mr. Panwar discussed the unique challenges faced by the region, emphasizing that the economy of the hills is predominantly women centric. Women are the primary labor force in agriculture. Prior to 1960, a barter economy was in place, and people were generally content. However, with the introduction of a cash economy, men and boys in the community had to leave the area to earn a livelihood for their households, leaving women behind. Traditionally, women took care of the household, worked on farms, and managed pastures. By joining the cooperative, these women were able to shift their traditional roles and reclaim their identities. The cooperative was established when the Himalayan Action Research Center (HARC) reached out to the community and encouraged various women’s Self Help Groups (SHGs) to come together.



From the English Storymap

The case study, “[Food from Forest- Bridging Tradition, Science and Sustainability in the Himalayas](#)” represents a leading example of a community-owned cooperative- *HARC: Alknanda Krishi Vyavsaya Bahuuddeshya Swayatt Sahkarita (HAKVBSS)*.

As a case study under the DECODE Knowledge Project, this initiative demonstrates how **community co-management, rooted in traditional knowledge and values**, can support **sustainable livelihoods, climate resilience, and women’s empowerment**.



Folk song presentation by women

Mr Panwar then guided the audience through **a series of stories and presentations** by the members of the Cooperative:

- **Ms Sarojani** narrated the story of *Tulsi*—how this traditional plant became a sustainable source of livelihood for women. Plants in the region were under constant threat from rains

and wildlife except Tulsi. Tulsi was one such crop that sustained even during rains and winters. Both HARC and the community recognised Tulsi's potential as a resilient crop alternative. However, the idea of cultivating Tulsi for commercial use posed a cultural dilemma. The sacred status of Tulsi meant that the community was deeply uncomfortable with the notion of monetising a plant they revered as holy. Acknowledging the depth of these cultural concerns, HARC adopted a sensitive, collaborative approach. With support from botanical research institutes and food scientists, they introduced distinct commercial varieties of Tulsi, specifically bred for cultivation and processing, which were differentiated from the sacred strain used in household rituals. This innovation allowed the community to preserve the sanctity of their religious practices while also addressing an urgent agricultural challenge. Women in the village, supported by HARC and technical experts, took a leading role in this transition. They cultivated the commercial Tulsi varieties and initiated small-scale processing efforts. One of the most notable outcomes was the development of Tulsi green and masala tea, which became widely appreciated for its health benefits, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic, when demand for herbal and immunity-boosting products surged. The initiative offered a sustainable solution to wildlife threats while enabling economic empowerment, particularly for women. The fields of Tulsi that now flourish in the village not only provide a source of income but also serve as a powerful symbol of resilience, innovation, and cultural integrity.

- **Ms Rekha ji** shared insights on the role of *wild fruits* in supporting local economies. Amla, Ber, Rhododendron, Mint, Triphala and other plants have a lot of medicinal properties. These plants are traditionally used in our homes. With the support of the cooperative and HARC we came to know about the commercial value and potential of these wild plants. The commercial processing of these medicinal plants has diversified women's income.
- **Mr. Ganesh** elaborated on the structure of the Cooperative's governing body, which consists of 9 members- 6 women and 3 men. The Cooperative has committees dedicated to overseeing quality control, cleanliness, and monitoring. They hold annual, quarterly, and monthly meetings to develop and present their production and sales plans. Additionally, they network with other development agencies and organise awareness camps, health camps, and other initiatives related to government schemes. They also engage in plantation activities.
- **Ms. Bhawani** shared her journey and the impact the cooperative has had on her life other women of the community. When the cooperative was launched, it brought immense joy to the women of the village, as it provided them with sustainable employment opportunities close to home. From packing and labelling to managing production processes, they were involved in every step. The income generated from their work has significantly contributed to improving their standard of living—including access to better food and ensuring quality education for their children.

However, the journey was not without its challenges. In the beginning, these women faced social resistance and ridicule. Many in the community questioned their decision to work outside their homes, and taunts were a daily occurrence. But the women remained undeterred. Over time, they found strength in each other and in the work, they were doing. Where once they were hesitant to even speak their own names in public, today they confidently engage in full-fledged conversations with visitors, buyers, and officials alike. Ms. Bhawani also spoke about the technological infrastructure that has enabled their success. With support from HARC, the women now operate machinery such as boilers and pulpers, managing the processing of raw forest produce with skill and confidence. As their operations have expanded, so has the profitability of their enterprise, further solidifying their place in the local economy.

In her closing remarks, Ms. Bhawani expressed heartfelt gratitude to HARC for building a sustainable livelihood model that empowers rural Himalayan women—not just economically, but socially and personally. Her story is a powerful testament to how grassroots initiatives, when rooted in community ownership and supported with the right resources, can foster lasting transformation.

## **Key Highlights of Cooperative Work**

### **Challenges in Mountain Regions**

Operating in mountainous terrains presents unique challenges, including difficult access, limited resources, and harsh climatic conditions. Despite these obstacles, HARC's team has shown remarkable persistence through innovative strategies and a resilient mindset. By tailoring their approaches to suit the rugged landscape, they have successfully established and maintained social enterprise models that uplift local communities.

### **Women Cadres and Knowledge Sharing**

Currently, there are 131 dedicated women cadres who serve as active knowledge bearers and trainers within the community. These women play a crucial role in empowering others by sharing their expertise in decision-making, fostering children's education, and driving community development initiatives. Their leadership not only enhances individual capabilities but also strengthens the overall social fabric of the community.

### **Impact and Outreach**

HAKVBSS's initiatives have made a significant difference in the lives of countless people. To date, the organization has directly benefited 210 primary members, providing them with essential resources and support. Additionally, the ripple effect of their work extends to over 4,000 secondary members, highlighting the expansive influence of Cooperative's programs across the region.

## Planning and Strategy

Effective planning is vital to HAKVBSS's success. The Cooperative employs a comprehensive approach to planning, with processes structured at annual, quarterly, and monthly intervals. This meticulous planning includes the development of dedicated strategies for marketing and sales, ensuring that their initiatives reach the right audiences and maximize impact.

### Sub-committees Established:

To enhance the effectiveness of its operations, HARC has established several specialized sub-committees, each focused on critical aspects of their work:

- Monitoring Committee (*Nigrani Samiti*): Responsible for overseeing the implementation of projects and ensuring that objectives are met efficiently.
- Cleanliness Committee (*Swachhta Samiti*): Focused on driving initiatives for environmental cleanliness and public health; promoting hygiene practices within the community.
- Quality Control Committee: Tasked with maintaining the standards of products and services offered through HARC's social enterprises, ensuring they meet the needs and expectations of beneficiaries.

Through these efforts, HAKVBSS continues to make a profound impact, fostering sustainable development and community resilience even in challenging terrain.

## Networking and Collaboration

HARC actively networks with other development agencies, inviting them for capacity-building, training, and awareness programs. They also engage the community through plantation drives, health camps, and other participatory activities.

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*“This initiative has given us livelihood opportunities and empowerment. Now we contribute to our household incomes. Earlier people used to taunt us—‘You keep going out!’ But we didn’t stop. We kept moving forward and now operate advanced machinery. When we started, our annual income was ₹2–2.5 lakh. Today, it has grown to ₹3–4 crore.”*

*Ms Bhawani, Cooperative member*

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Reflecting on the resonance between traditional knowledge and sustainable development, Dr Karol emphasised that climate action must be localised, drawing from lived knowledge. He reiterated the role of cooperatives in enhancing economic, social and environmental well-being. He noted that models like HARC present a scalable template for inclusive, just and regenerative development.

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*“When we speak of community-led sustainable growth and collective action, it is important to reflect on how traditional knowledge can be shaped into business models for sustainable development. HARC’s cooperative stands as a powerful example of this process, where economic opportunities are generated by valuing and leveraging traditional wisdom.”*

*Dr. Anshuman Karol, PRIA*

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## 5. Panel Discussion

### Dr. Dyutiman Choudhary



**Dr. Dyutiman Choudhary** is a Senior Scientist with the Sustainable Agrifood Systems Program at CIMMYT and serves as its Country Representative for Nepal. With 26 years of experience in community-based natural resource management, rural enterprise development, and agri-business, he has previously worked at ICRISAT in Nairobi, overseeing development strategies in Eastern and Southern Africa. He also served as the Lead for high value products and value chains at ICIMOD. Dr. Choudhary holds a PhD in Business Management, an MBA in Agribusiness Management,

and a bachelor’s degree in forestry. He has significant research and program management experience across South Asia, China, Myanmar, and Eastern and Southern Africa, including validating traditional knowledge of Himalayan women and establishing resilient supply chains from 2009 to 2014.

Drawing on his earlier involvement with HARC (2008–2009), Dr. Chaudhary revisited foundational work that remains relevant and impactful in today’s climate adaptation efforts.

Dr. Chaudhary began by contextualizing mountain livelihoods as inherently diverse, shaped by both farm-based activities—agriculture, livestock, forest, and pasture use—and non-farm income sources such as small businesses and wage work. However, global challenges such as climate change, globalization, and socio-economic shifts have rendered these livelihoods increasingly vulnerable, particularly affecting women, who are central to food production and nutrition security in mountain regions.

Dr. Chaudhary highlighted the importance of developing value chains that advance a **triple bottom line** approach:

1. Environmental sustainability
2. Gender equity
3. Poverty reduction

The “*Food from the Forest*” initiative emerged as a compelling example of how women-led, community-based enterprises can thrive in fragile mountain ecosystems, blending conservation with economic opportunity.

### **Action Research as a Tool for Decolonization**

A core principle of the initiative was participatory action research aimed at dismantling colonial ideologies and reclaiming Indigenous knowledge. This involved:

- Integrating traditional knowledge systems with modern science
- Building equitable systems through community engagement
- Validating traditional practices through scientific research

For instance, in Chamoli, traditional forest norms upheld by Van Panchayats were strengthened through scientific validation, ultimately leading to government recognition and endorsement of sustainable harvesting models.

### **Innovations in Markets and Institutions**

Traditional practices were enriched through:

- Modern processing techniques
- Consumer-oriented innovations (e.g., improved packaging, hygiene, visual appeal)
- Institutional linkages to position traditional products competitively in modern markets

Examples included the improved processing of Malta oranges, Amla, and Tulsi. In the case of Tulsi, cultivation practices were adapted to enhance eugenol content—balancing cultural preservation with scientific refinement.

A compelling example of co-production in practice was the **Bay Leaf Initiative** in Najmola Valley, Chamoli. Dr. Chaudhary shared how the project piloted a shift in forest policy:

- Permits were transferred from private traders to Van Panchayats.
- Women were empowered to lead the collection and post-harvest processes.
- A community-driven code of conduct was co-developed with the Uttarakhand Forest Development Corporation.

Sustainable harvesting practices were implemented, such as:

- Collecting only the lower two-thirds of bay leaf trees.
- Limiting harvests to 40% of the estimated yield.
- Planning inventories sustainably, e.g., 2,000 trees yielding 50 tons of dried leaves (approx. 25kg per bag).

This led to:

- Environmentally sound resource use.
- Increased local ownership and governance.
- Market access shifts from distant hubs like Tanakpur to nearer areas, reducing carbon and cost.

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- *“HARC’s initiative demonstrates how community-based natural resource management, co-facilitated by both state and non-state actors, can succeed. The co-production, decolonisation and transformative change depend on the institutions leading it. They empower people to make decisions, they don’t come with a top-down approach rather let the people lead from the front. It creates a co-governance model aligning with Dr. Tandon’s vision of a community-led, state-supported system of sustainable development”*

- *Dr. Dyutiman Choudhary*

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### **Final Reflections**

The Tulsi initiative underscored how traditional varieties, when merged with scientific innovations- can unlock transformative outcomes.

Dr. Chaudhary concluded with key takeaways:

- Co-production, decolonization, and transformative change are interlinked.
- Success comes when communities lead from the front.
- Top-down models are less effective than those rooted in local knowledge and collective ownership.

He called for sustained support to institutions that empower communities and nurture sustainable, inclusive, and resilient development in mountain regions.

### **Prof Paula Banerjee**

Prof Paula Banerjee specializes in women in borderlands and forced migration. She is the former Vice Chancellor of Sanskrit College & University, and President of the International Association for Studies in Forced Migration. Currently, she holds the IDRC Endowed Chair on Gender and Forced Displacement at the Asian Institute of Technology in Thailand. A prolific scholar with numerous awards, including the Fulbright SIR in 2013, her research focuses on the human rights of migrants and refugees, particularly in South and South-East Asia. Some of her recent publications include "The Long 2020" (2024) and "Gender, Identity and Migration" (2022). She also serves as a guest professor in Germany and is an editorial board member for several international journals, including the Journal of Refugees Studies. Additionally, she works as a senior consultant for the ILO on migrant worker rights.



Professor Banerjee offered a powerful critique of the concept of ‘empowerment’ as commonly used in development and research discourse.

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*“Researchers often say their work will empower communities. Frankly, I find that laughable... because we — the researchers — are the ones getting empowered through this process. Communities are often far more empowered than we are. They are our teachers. We can, at best, be facilitators — translating their lived knowledge into policy spaces.”*

*Prof. Paula Bannerjee*

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Professor Banerjee emphasised that the role of researchers should not be to impose knowledge, but rather to carry community experiences to broader platforms. Researchers have a responsibility to:

- Translate local knowledge into national and international policy dialogues.
- Ensure that research processes are shaped by and accountable to community voices.
- Recognise and respect the depth of contextual, lived experiences.

She gave the example of a migrant flower seller whose livelihood is disrupted by climate variability — a reminder that climate change is not only theoretical but a lived, daily reality. She notes *“The migrant worker only gets four good hours — from 6 to 10 a.m. — before the heat ruins her flowers. In the evening, she tries again.”*

Prof Banerjee also reflected on the ethics of research, criticizing extractive models where researchers collect data and disappear, offering nothing in return. This, she argued, amounts to violence — not just bad practice. *She propounds “too often, communities are reduced to field sites. People extract data and never return — no feedback, no acknowledgment, no recognition. That’s not only unethical, but it’s also violent. Instead, community-informed research must be grounded in empathy, respect, humility, and time. Proper ethnography, she said, cannot be done in a day. It requires relationship-building, trust, and sustained presence.”*

Reinforcing the notion that community knowledge cannot be reduced to statistics, she stressed that community knowledge is inherently relational and not just statistical. Additionally, she invoked the legacy of the Chipko movement to make this point *by arguing that those women weren’t writing literature reviews or designing surveys but were simply living their politics.*

### **Final Reflections**

In a final, impassioned reflection, Professor Banerjee addressed the issue of representation. Despite the emphasis on women’s empowerment throughout the discussions, she questioned why

women were not given more leadership space at the event and propounded that women from the communities should lead from the front.

She concluded with a powerful call for researchers to act with political integrity propounding that *in a violent world of knowledge hierarchies, our politics must amplify voices must be a vehicle for their truth.*

### **Dr Arjan de Haan**

Dr. Arjan is a Climate Specialist at Canada's International Development Research Centre He is responsible for projects in Asia under the FCDO-IDRC program on Climate Adaptation and Resilience (CLARE), based in New Delhi. His work focuses on supporting southern-based research, including studies in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, and integrating climate and gender equity considerations into policy analysis. He previously led the IDRC GROW program on women's economic empowerment and published and taught on social policy in development contexts, labour migration, social inequalities, and the aid industry.



Dr Arjan commended the organisation's longstanding efforts to elevate lived experiences and make them relevant across policy and governance levels. Addressing the question on strategies that can be used to engage donors and the importance of supporting community-engaged research he reiterated that while the role of funders may appear limited, it is crucial in supporting systemic transformation.

In his remarks, Dr. Arjan highlighted IDRC's commitment through its climate adaptation programming to ensuring that scientific knowledge is not only produced but also applied meaningfully to urgent and complex challenges. Noting that climate vulnerabilities are already deeply embedded across South Asia, he underscored that communities—such as those in Kaleshwar—are experiencing the impacts of climate change regardless of whether the 1.25°C global threshold has been formally breached.

The work of DECODE, PRIA, and its local partners was described as timely and critically essential. He congratulated the Kaleshwar team, particularly the Himalayan Action Research Centre (HARC), for their sustained, community-led initiatives. Subsequently, from a funder's perspective, Dr. Arjan asserted that such grounded case studies are essential in reinforcing the importance of long-term, community-driven approaches. He further acknowledged the deeply rooted structural and historical barriers that shape local vulnerabilities and emphasized that meaningful change cannot be achieved through short-term or top-down solutions.

Dr. Arjan echoed Professor Paula’s emphasis on the centrality of women’s voices in climate resilience and local governance. Women, they affirmed, have always played a pivotal role across the region, and the ongoing work discussed during the session further validates this truth.

One of the key takeaways from the DECODE project, according to the Dr. Arjan, is the importance of bridging community knowledge with scientific evidence. Rather than positioning the two in opposition, the challenge, and the opportunity- lies in bringing them together in equitable, respectful, and community-centred ways. They emphasized that generating satellite data or scientific analyses is insufficient if this knowledge does not reach those who are living the impacts daily and striving to adapt.

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*“We cannot wait for the system to change; we need to make sure that we change the systems of knowledge as we go along as sure as possible”*

*Dr Arjan De Haan*

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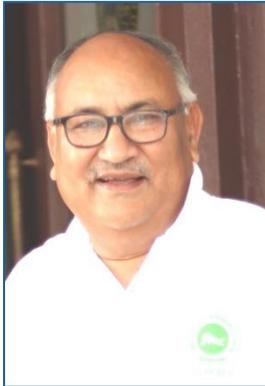
### **Final reflections**

He reiterated his admiration for the Kaleshwar team’s efforts, noting that their intergenerational, community-driven resilience offers a powerful model for others. He called on fellow funders and institutions to support systems that enable co-creation of knowledge, return tangible value to local communities, and meaningfully shift power to those with lived experience.

Finally, Dr. Arjan emphasized the need for equity in the broader climate knowledge ecosystem. This, he argued, requires not only changes in funding mechanisms, but also a commitment to sustained partnerships between local and global knowledge systems. The DECODE project and the discussions held during the session were cited as strong examples of what such collaborative, equitable, and just approaches can look like in practice.

## Closing Remarks

### Dr Mahendra Singh Kunwar



**Dr. MAHENDRA SINGH KUNWAR** is founding member and chief advisor of the voluntary organisation Himalayan Action Research Centre (HARC). Dr Kunwar has more than 40 years of development experience in the Himalayan regions. His work has been focused on integrated and participatory development, agri-business promotion, development communication, small enterprise development, rural marketing linkages and appropriate technology, including planning, implementation and monitoring & evaluation experiences. Over a period of 40 years, he has changed thousands of communities and livelihoods through his development initiatives under the umbrella of HARC. Considering his experience in rural development, he has been nominated to and served as a member of many local, regional and national level committees.

A founding member and senior advisor of the Himalayan Action Research Centre (HARC), Dr. Kunwar reflected on the enduring challenges in bridging academic research with grassroots community engagement. Citing Professor Banerjee, he reminded participants that “community is not merely a source of information,” emphasizing the need to rethink extractive approaches that undervalue local knowledge systems.

Drawing from the Uttarakhand context, he argued that there is a critical disconnect: despite the presence of 27 universities in the state, academic research seldom influences public policy on essential issues such as land and forest governance. Instead, such research often remains confined to academic departments and libraries, with limited community relevance or application. Dr. Kunwar called for open access to knowledge as a pathway to sustainable development and local learning. He postulated the DECODE project as a valuable model that integrates scientific research with traditional knowledge, particularly relevant to the approximately 3,000–4,000 forest villages in Uttarakhand. This integration, he noted, is essential for both livelihoods and empowerment in climate-sensitive geographies.

A key point in the reflection was the need to build **community ownership over knowledge, work, and resources**, which is foundational to achieving meaningful climate resilience. He advocated for valuing traditional knowledge and cultural values—not merely as data sources, but as legitimate and dynamic systems of understanding and adaptation.

Furthermore, Dr. Kunwar also critiqued the tendency of academia and development practitioners to work in silos, stating:

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*“We often work in isolation and don’t know whether our models are appreciated or can be replicated. This is where such platforms that facilitate knowledge exchange between communities and institutions assume importance. Such spaces foster mutual learning and strengthens the collective response to climate change and sustainable development challenges”*

*Dr Mahendra Singh Kunwar*

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To address this, he suggested the creation of platforms that facilitate knowledge exchange between communities and institutions. Such spaces, he argued, would foster mutual learning and strengthen the collective response to climate change and sustainable development challenges.

### **Concluding Remarks**

Dr Karol acknowledged the valuable insights shared by the HARC advisor and echoed the relevance of the DECODE project in forging connections between academic institutions, research organizations, and local communities—both within India and globally.

He emphasized that **community-led climate adaptation practices must be recognized, documented, and widely shared**, underscoring the power of grounded, context-specific responses to climate challenges.

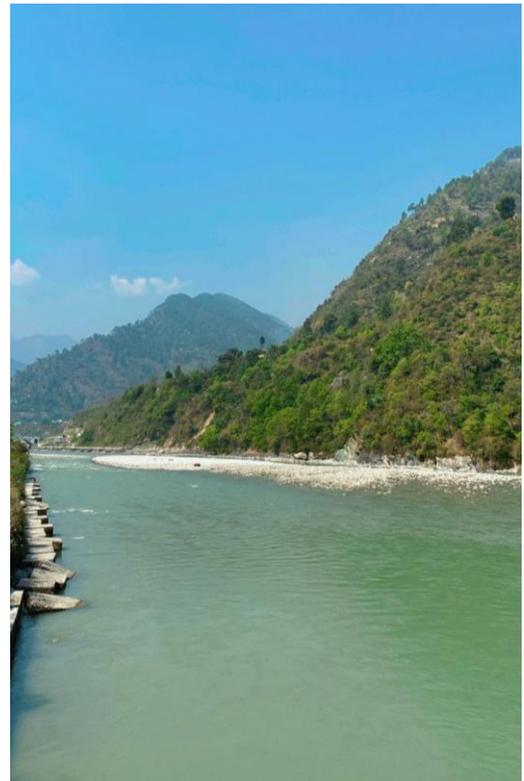
### **Reflections on Preparing for the Webinar: From the Plains to the Peaks**

Organising the DECODE webinar from the serene heights of Chamoli was no ordinary feat. The journey itself was an experience—more than five hours of driving from the bustling capital of Dehradun, through narrow mountain roads, zigzag turns, and ongoing road construction. As the altitude rose, so did the sense of leaving the chaos behind. Upon reaching Chamoli, known as the "abode of the gods"—we were met with a calm and peace that felt worlds apart from urban life, we just left behind. HARC's office sits amidst this serenity, with the lower Himalayas standing tall and gentle stream of river flowing nearby, offering a powerful reminder of the spiritual and ecological richness of the region.

However, such remote beauty comes with its own set of logistical challenges—especially when preparing for a technical event like a webinar. The collaborative team from **HARC and PRIA** had to transport all the required equipment—laptop, projector, camera, speakers, cables, and tripod—from the Delhi. Setting up the infrastructure was no small task. HARC's office functions more like a processing unit than a quiet office, with a constant flow of local visitors, making it difficult to find a distraction-free space for the webinar.

A day before the event, after careful set-up and testing of all the equipment, disaster struck—the electricity went out. Although HARC had generators, they had not been in use for quite some time. The team quickly got to work, connecting the generator to an extension cord pulled from storage. But to everyone's dismay, it didn't work. In the fading light, the team dismantled the cord, rewired it, and reconnected it, hoping for a spark—both literal and metaphorical. Thus, the webinar remained not just another task, but a collective mission. Each member of the HARC team took ownership of some aspect of the event preparation: one managed the projector set up, another took charge of the generator, someone else kept a vigilant eye on ensuring the space is quiet by limiting unnecessary entries. The collective effort by the team was an inspiring sight.

The team was on edge, holding their breath and hoping things would come together. Eventually, the generator worked—but the fear of disruption remained. Whether from a curious monkey, unexpected rain, or a last-minute technical glitch, the next day still felt uncertain.



*Kaleshwar View*

With everything in place, and a mix of prayer, patience, and perseverance, we left things in the hands of fate and went to sleep.

The women of the cooperative were surprisingly incredibly confident and relaxed. The thought of expressing their lived realities to a large audience did not make them nervous in any way. And why should it? They were simply narrating their own stories without performing or pretending.

To our relief and joy, the webinar went smoothly the next day—an outcome that felt hard-earned and incredibly rewarding. We had more than a hundred participants joining from across the globe and rather than being overwhelmed by the scale of the audience, the women saw this as an opportunity to finally let their efforts and journeys be recognised.

This experience was not just about putting together a successful digital event in a remote area, but also about navigating real-world challenges with teamwork, adaptability, and a deep respect for the place and people we were working with. We also realised that events like these serve as a platform for direct representation and validates the community that their experiences are not only important but worthy of national and international attention. Opportunities like these send a strong message that local knowledge must not be overlooked.



*PRIA team presenting a token of appreciation to the HARC team for their contribution to community resilience and sustainable development in the Himalayas*

## Conclusion and Key Takeaways

The webinar “*Food from Forest: Bridging Tradition, Science and Sustainability in the Himalayas*” brought together academics, community leaders, practitioners, and development actors to reflect on how traditional knowledge systems, when recognised and respected, can be harmonised with scientific approaches to foster sustainable and inclusive development in fragile mountain ecosystems. The conversations, stories, and reflections throughout the session highlighted several critical lessons:

**1. Traditional Knowledge as Foundation for Resilience:** Traditional knowledge is not just a legacy of the past; it is a living, evolving system rooted in cultural practices, spiritual values, and generations of lived experience. In mountain communities, it forms the basis of ecological stewardship, sustainable agriculture, and forest-based livelihoods. The DECODE initiative affirms that recognizing the validity and richness of these knowledge systems is essential to building climate-resilient and adaptive societies.

**2. Co-production of Knowledge Enhances Relevance and Impact:** Rather than a one-way transfer of knowledge from experts to communities, the DECODE approach champions the *co-production* of knowledge — where community insights and scientific perspectives come together as equals. This method ensures that solutions are locally relevant, culturally appropriate, and more likely to be adopted and sustained.

**3. Women as Anchors of Sustainable Development:** Women are not just participants but often the central agents of change in mountain economies. Their leadership in cooperatives like HARC has led to increased incomes, better health outcomes, stronger local institutions, and greater social recognition. Their traditional roles as custodians of seeds, forests, and food systems give them unique ecological knowledge that is crucial for conservation and sustainability.

**4. Participatory Research as a Tool for Decolonization:** Decolonizing research means shifting power — allowing communities to define their own priorities, lead inquiries, and control the outcomes. Action research, when grounded in participatory principles, enables this shift. It dismantles extractive research practices and allows for mutual learning. Dr. Dyutiman Chaudhary’s reflection on action research reaffirms that blending traditional knowledge with science must be done equitably and respectfully, not imposed from outside.

**5. Market and Policy Innovations Rooted in Culture:** Cultural knowledge, when paired with modern tools like improved processing, packaging, and marketing, can lead to new economic opportunities for marginalised communities. The success of Tulsi and Amla value chains in Chamoli shows how scientific enhancement of traditional crops — can generate livelihoods while preserving cultural practices.

**6. Ethics of Research: Representation, Respect, and Reciprocity:** As emphasised by Prof. Paula Banerjee, research with communities must be rooted in humility, empathy, and ethical responsibility. Too often, communities are treated as “field sites” rather than collaborators. Researchers must ensure that findings are shared back, contributions acknowledged, and benefits

equitably distributed. Moreover, representation must go beyond tokenism — if women are the focus, they should lead the narrative and be visible in knowledge platforms.

**7. Researchers as Facilitators, Not Saviors:** The webinar reiterated that communities are not passive recipients of knowledge — they are agents of change. Researchers must see themselves not as saviours or experts, but as facilitators and amplifiers of community voices. The best research emerges when it listens deeply, respects lived realities, and helps translate grassroots insights into policy and practice — without diluting or dominating them.

### **Final Reflection**

The DECODE project and the stories shared through this webinar challenge us to rethink how knowledge is created, valued, and used. The webinar highlighted the importance of dismantling hierarchies in knowledge systems, recognising the leadership of women and marginalised communities, and co-creating a future that is sustainable, inclusive, and just.

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### **Community partners**

[Himalayan Action Research Centre](#) —Alaknanda Krishi Vyavsya Bahuudeshya Swayat Sahkarita (HAKVBSS) and [Participatory Research in Asia \(PRIA\)](#)

### **Link to Storymaps**

<https://storymaps.com/stories/2d17e008e8cf430484100662a3a22ee8> (English Version)

<https://storymaps.com/stories/cf03f46b0ac942ef93b2c0ada3cc21a8> (Hindi Version)