Simen Mountains, Ethiopia : a conservation oriented development project

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Simen Mountains – Ethiopia
A Conservation Oriented Development Project

By Bruno Messerli*

Simen is the name of the high mountain massif in Ethiopia which is surrounded by old cultural centres. It has preserved its special and unique landscape with plants and animals which can only be seen there. This refuge is endangered by the Highland farmers who, in constant search of land, are moving its borders to higher elevations. For this reason the Ethiopian government declared at the end of October 1969 a part of the Simen Highlands as a national park. Swiss preparatory work was a part of this project, in an effort to save threatened animals, especially the Ethiopian Walia Ibex, from extinction. We learned very quickly that the destiny of these animals was directly linked to the destiny of the human population and its environment. With this knowledge, we faced a very complex development problem.

Conservation and Development

Conservation and development are the two main ideas which Simen must face in the future. Too often the static element of conservation and the dynamic element of development are in conflict instead of in coordination. What does this mean for the problems of the Simen Mountains?

Conservation is an urgent demand if the fantastic mountain landscape of the unique plant and animal refuge is to survive destruction. This is particularly true in the case of Walia Ibex which is threatened with extinction. Moreover, the inhabitants of these mountains, who are continually looking for new land in higher and steeper elevations, are unaware of ecological threats (namely the process of erosion) in their own living area.

Which criteria must be used to evaluate areas for preservation, for reafforestation, for land-use by terracing etc.? How can the inhabitants of these mountains conceive that these conservation methods are in their behalf? Conservation is a very difficult problem in a developing area where

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the human being is living on the edge of his existence and is faced with a threatening dependency on nature.

Development is the only real alternative. Conservation without development is senseless and cannot be realized. When the farming methods on suitable land and food supplies are guaranteed, only then can the inhabitants understand the necessity of conservation-oriented development. How shall this development go on when there is not enough land, when the significance of forest destruction and soil erosion cannot be grasped and when intervention in the hereditary rights in their lives cannot be understood?

Again we see development is a very difficult task in an area where the human being is living on the most minimal subsistence level. With these problems, summarized in "conservation-oriented development", we see our future work. Can we solve these problems?

The Meaning of the Scientific Basic Research

All too often development projects are done without knowledge of ecological background, with disregard for nature and without an observation of human activities and habits. In Simen we see that the people themselves disregard the conditions of nature and endanger their own existence by cultivating land without terracing. Therefore, we cannot learn from the mountain farmer and have to do all our own background work for the research. In this sense background work is not a pointless academic exercise or a science isolated from the real world, but an urgently-needed tool for understanding the processes and systems in which everything has a cause and effect with complicated feed-back mechanisms.

From this knowledge, we began our work in different stages: first, topographical maps had to be drawn up, then zoological and botanical work was done by our Zurich colleagues, Nievergelt and Klötzli. Furthermore, information about the climate and soil had to be gained, which has been interrupted by the current political situation, and

finally we planned to get a better understanding of the relationship between the social and economic conditions of the people.

The present publication is the result of our first step, that is, based on the drawing of the maps. With this we would like to show that the drawing of excellent topographical maps is possible under the worst conditions and that basic groundwork allows research in the change of cultivated land, in the change and function of the market-town Debark and the extent to which soil erosion has spread. All of these studies are only parts of the general analysis and evaluation of the whole area, with the aim of assigning its importance to farming and nature.

Such an integral and ecological concept requires scientific background. Why does such work, then, have such slim support from development institutions? Don't we need groundwork for development projects in our mountain areas, and why shouldn't we need it for development projects in the mountains of the Third World? Is the reason for this because this type of work is less spectacular, requires more time, a more intense personal engagement and more difficult fieldwork? We should be more conscious of these problems: Only with serious background knowledge can we gain long-term effects!

Unfortunately our work has been disrupted by the political situation, therefore a comprehensive ana-lysis of the entire area has not been possible. Nevertheless, a simple concept for an integral development project can be proposed, one which has already been discussed with the responsible authorities in Addis Ababa and one which can be used as a basic discussion for future work.

Simen Mountain Projects

The enclosed chart shows the division in a conservation program of the national park and a development program for the surrounding farmland. Both require the scientific basics which are only partly completed. "Related Projects" are shown separately, partly because governmental organizations take care of these problems and they cannot be integrated into a timetable. Staff and timetable must be viewed as proposals without obligation and they must be adapted to future situations and possibilities.

Summarizing, we would like to point out that the whole integral and interdisciplinary program shouldn't be anything more than a summary of experience before the interruption of our work at the end of 1976. In case the work can be continued, there would be at least a proposal project and a program which allows the carrying on of our aim: to conserve and develop this unique mountain area, whatever the political situation may be.

SIMEN — MOUNTAIN — PROJECTS

Goal: Preservation of nature and improvement of land use and essential human conditions

TIMING	SIMEN MTS. NATIONAL PARK PROGRAM	SCIENTIFIC PROGRAM	TECHNICAL PROGRAM	RELATED PROBLEMS AND PROJECTS

PARK WARDEN · TECHNICAL DIRECTOR

PHASE I (2—3 years)

SIMEN MTS. NATIONAL PARK PROGRAM:
Aim: Preservation of natural conditions
Animal protection
Projects: Continuation of the existing programs
— Reafforestation with native trees
— ev. Reintroduction of animals
Project area: mainly park, ev. buffer zone

SCIENTIFIC PROGRAM:
Aim: Studies and tests of improved land use possibilities
Projects: Collection of basic data for
— soil conservation
— actual and potential land use categories (farm land, range land, reafforastation)
Data specification:
— *Environmental data:*
— topographic maps*
— soil and soil eorsion maps*
— vegetation map*
— natural resources (biomass-production, water, minerals)*
— climatic parameters*
— *Socio-economic data:*
— land use techniques and patterns
— agricultural products*
— trade and market*
— census data (men, cattle, houses)
— nutrition and health situation
* partially completed
Project area: mainly surroundings of Simen Mts. National Park
Personnel: 2 specialists and Ethiopian counterparts (not necessarily permanent)

TECHNICAL PROGRAM:
Aim: Improved land use in Simen
Projects: Pilot farm and / or test areas
Project area: Ambaras (outside park, close to the way to the market
Personnel: 1 technical and 1 agricultural officer (permanent)

RELATED PROBLEMS AND PROJECTS:
Agricultural:
— Training Centre
— Cooperatives or other farmer organizations
— Trade and market

Social:
— Health Centre (ev. combined with pilot farm)
— School (education of next generation)

Governmental Problems:
— Family-Planning
— Resettlement

Other:
— Road construction
— Development of (controlled) tourism

PHASE II (some years)

FOLLOW-UP PROGRAM
Aim: Propagation of the technical program
Projects: Pilot farm in different regions in Simen. Instruction and demonstration
Project areas: Surroundings of National Park (buffer zone)
Personnel: open

PHASE III (one generation)

LONG-TERM GOAL
Aim: Preservation of a unique ecosystem and native asset

LONG-TERM GOAL
Aim: Improved, ecologically and economically balanced land use in Simen