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Mountain Forum: An Innovative Network of Networks

Promoting global action for equitable and sustainable mountain development

Mountain Forum (MF) was founded in 1996 by 3 organizations—The Mountain Institute, USA (TMI), The International Potato Center, Peru (CIP), and the International Centre for Integrated Mountain Development, Nepal (ICIMOD). These organizations established an Interim Facilitating Committee.

Since then, MF has evolved as an innovative international network composed of 5 regional networks to facilitate implementation of Chapter 13 of Agenda 21 ("Managing Fragile Ecosystems for Sustainable Mountain Development," often called Mountain Agenda). MF operates through regional nodes: the African Node (hosted by ICRAF in Kenya), the Latin American Node (hosted at the International Potato Center, Peru), the European Mountain Forum (located at IUCN, Switzerland), and the Asia Pacific Mountain Network (at ICIMOD, Nepal). The Global Information Server Node, which also serves as the North American focal point, is hosted at The Mountain Institute in the United States.

MF is a membership-driven organization bringing together a wide array of stakeholders: researchers, policymakers, community leaders, government agencies, grant makers, corporations, students, and tourists, among many others. MF has a rapidly growing membership of more than 2800 individuals and over 150 organizations dedicated to sustainable mountain development. Membership is free, open to all segments of society, and currently spread over 100 countries.

Taking the lead in quality information on mountain development on the Web

MF supports global action to promote equitable, ecologically sustainable mountain development. This is done through information sharing, mutual support, and advocacy. To achieve its objectives, MF uses modern and traditional communications, supports networking and capacity building, and encourages members to be proactive in advocating sustainable development of mountain areas.

As a strong electronic knowledge-gathering and sharing platform, the Mountain Forum's web site, www.mtnforum.org, is one of the most exhaustive, valued, and moderated resources in the electronic cyber media, with over 1700 documents and more than 6000 discussion list archives.

MF services

Besides managing the membership database, registration, and enquiries, the MF team, located in 5 regional offices around the world, provides specialized management of electronic discussion lists. E-lists with a geographic focus are Africa, Asia Pacific, Europe, InfoAndina (Andes), Latin America, North America, and the Summary and Global lists. There are other thematic lists that are on-going discussion platforms that allow members to share specific subject-interest lists. These include Mountain Women, Mountain Geography, Paramos (Andes), Huemul (Andes), Andes Potatoes, Andes Gender and Natural Resources, Peru IYM, Bolivia IYM, and TOPAS (Training of Protected Areas Staff). Members and even nonmembers are invited to join one or more discussion lists. Besides these, the MF hosts several internal lists to support planning and administration of transboundary mountain networks.

The various regional nodes and the Global Information Server Node also provide an innovative opportunity for MF members and other interested persons to join



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electronic conferences. These are on-line, thematic conferences moderated and managed technically by MF staff and supported by invited subject moderators. So far, the MF team has conducted 14 E-conferences on a wide variety of topics related to mountains and the people who live in mountain regions. MF also provides technical training for mountain groups on electronic networking and focuses on capacity building for small NGOs.

The International Year of Mountains 2002

Besides these daily services, the MF's calendar of events is linked to the UN Food and Agriculture Organization's International Year of Mountains (IYM) 2002 pages. MF plays a key role in advocating the Mountain Agenda at various international meetings and conferences, particularly with FAO's Ad-hoc Inter-Agency Meetings and the Commission on Sustainable Development (CSD).

MF has a special IYM web site with ideas for action. It has also assisted in development of the IYM homepage, finalization of the IYM logo, and in providing regular updates on events and activities.

MF is actively involved in several key events being planned for IYM celebrations, including the Celebrating Mountain Women meeting, the Rio+10 mountain-related workshops and conferences, the Bishkek Global Mountain Summit, the Italian High Summit and the Quito ANEM Conference.

Several of the regional nodes are providing information services and support to the national committees, such as the Latin American Node in the case of Peru and Bolivia.

Building a strong network of supporters and partners

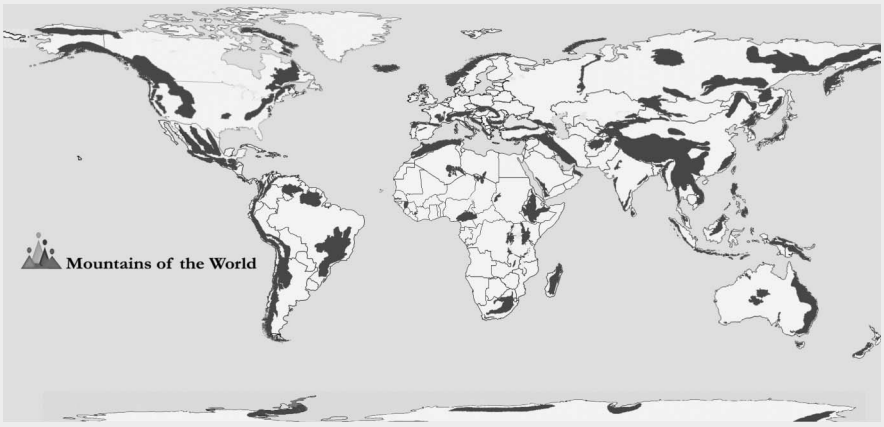
The Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation (SDC) has been a substantial sponsor of MF global and regional initiatives. With its core team of MF staff who work hard to build supporters and partners around the world, MF has become stronger. The biggest list of supporters comprises MF members and contributors to discussion lists. MF is a key supplier of information to FAO, the lead manager for IYM 2002.

MF has supported *Mountain Research and Development* (*MRD*) in its new phase of operations and works closely with the editorial team to provide information for the journal's development section. MF and its regional nodes have also played a key role in contributing and soliciting articles for *MRD*. MF also supports the Swiss Mission to the UN and the University of Berne through advocacy of Mountain Agenda issues at CSD. The International Development Research Centre (IDRC) in Canada has partnered with MF and has provided support to planning and communications meetings and provides Bellanet E-mail list hosting and services, media outreach, etc. The UN Environment Programme (UNEP) has been an active partner and supporter of MF's networking activities. Support has enabled developing countries to be represented in MF meetings, in communication training workshops, and in global advocacy efforts. The European Union has enabled the European Mountain Forum to provide Web page hosting and discussion list services to its members across Europe. The key to the success of this network is the constant backing of the members and volunteers and the dedication of the MF staff.

Institution building and governance

The rapidly growing MF network can no longer function as an informal network. It is currently in the process of obtaining independent legal status and formalizing its hosting relationship with ICIMOD, where the MF secretariat is headquartered. This will also allow it to negotiate funding and support from partners. An eminent international board of directors representing all the nodes, chaired by Dr Hubert Zandstra, along with SDC and FAO as observers to the MF Board of Directors, currently governs MF to ensure that this process of institutionalization is in line with the several recommendations of global consultants. MF is headed by Mr Alejandro Camino, the Executive Secretary.

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