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Celebrating Mountain Women: A Move to Empower Women in Mountain Regions

Organized by the International Centre for Integrated Mountain Development (ICIMOD) and the Mountain Forum (MF), "Celebrating Mountain Women: A Global Gathering in Bhutan" (CMW) took place in Paro and Thimphu, Bhutan, from 1 to 4 October 2002. Although Bhutan was an excellent location for such a conference, given the traditionally higher status of women in this country, it confronted the organizing team with a series of logistical problems that were not easy to solve. With the help of the Bhutan Ministries of Foreign Affairs, Agriculture, and others, however, the conference participants from 35 different countries and 5 continents were able to enjoy the unique privilege of being hosted by a beautiful and friendly mountain country that is only accessible to relatively few foreigners every year.

A further challenge for the organizers was to offer a range of participants—from grassroots organizations to entrepreneurs, the media to development agencies, and research to policy specialists—something substantial to take home. The organizers chose to run parallel events during most of the conference, with 2 plenary sessions and several celebrations that brought the more than 250 participants together (Figure 1). Although this was a necessary choice in terms of time available, it deprived many people of the pleasure of attending screenings of mountain films, meeting with grassroots women from all over the world, spending time browsing through the remarkable variety of crafts and information leaflets that were displayed in the specially constructed exhibition area, or participating in important discussions on the 5 set themes. Nevertheless, the conference was a success in terms of networking, celebrating women's achievements, and formulating concerns and demands.



FIGURE 1 Two evening events (and several common meals) were welcome opportunities for ethnic and stakeholder groups from 5 different continents to interact. A reception with dancing and a fashion show took place, during which many of the conference participants proudly walked the catwalk to display traditional attires crafted by mountain women. (Photo by Ujol Sherchan, 2 October 2002)

The Bhutanese people and government offered opening and closing ceremonies that gave participants a fascinating insight into identity-forming rituals and ceremonial events. The presence of the Prime Minister on the first day and of a member of the royal family on the final day confirmed the general opinion that women's concerns and gender equality are given genuine attention in Bhutan. The conference organizers wisely invited Ms. Neten Zangmo, Cabinet Secretary of the Royal Government of Bhutan, to convey the Thimphu Declaration (the main outcome of the conference) to the Bishkek Global Mountain Summit.

From empowerment to integration

This Declaration calls on the international community to include the perspectives of mountain women and the principles of gender mainstreaming and gender equality in various documents, and to ensure a strong presence of women representatives in post-International Year of Mountains (IYM) activities, especially those planned to take place under the umbrella of the International Partnership for Sustainable Development in Mountain Regions—one of the main outcomes of the Johannesburg World Summit on Sustainable Development (WSSD). Indeed, as stated in the Thimphu Declaration, without women, it is impossible to achieve

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sustainable development in mountain areas.

It will be necessary in future to provide the institutional and financial support needed to address women's concerns as well as to provide gender-balanced and integrated solutions. It will also be necessary to acknowledge and respect the variety of mountain communities and their culture, and to use a rights- and opportunity-based development approach. But perhaps more important at this stage, it is necessary to learn more about the status and the role of mountain women in different countries and regions in order to formulate adequate policies and projects, as the conference showed that mountain women still live under very difficult conditions in many countries, including Europe and North America. CMW also showed that mountain women have been extremely innovative, and their resilience has enabled them to survive against all odds: this, too, needs to be taken into account because it holds tremendous potential.

The 5 thematic workshops that took place during the conference and relied on a multiplicity of papers, partly available through the Mountain Forum and its Mountain Women E-mail Discussion List (www.mtnforum.org/women), produced recommendations that are summarized in the Declaration. The recommendations focused on natural resources and environment; legal, political, and human rights; culture and indigenous knowledge; health and well-being; and entrepreneurship. The organizers announced that the process and activities of CMW will be documented in a printed report that will also be available online, a 30-minute video documentary, and profiles of mountain women at CMW. Hopefully, it will be possible to fully integrate the concerns and perspectives of women voiced at the conference during and after the ultimate IYM event, the Bishkek Global Mountain Summit.

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Jack Ives and Bruno Messerli Win King Albert I Memorial Foundation Award

Professor Jack D. Ives, founding editor of *Mountain Research and Development*, and Professor Bruno Messerli of the University of Berne are among the 5 recipients of the King Albert I Memorial Foundation Award for 2002. The King Albert I Memorial Foundation was established by the King Albert Fund "to honor persons or institutions that have distinguished themselves through exceptional and lasting achievements in the Mountain World." Persons or institutions chosen for this honor receive The King Albert Medal of Merit, which is awarded from time to time at the discretion of the Foundation. The 5th Award Ceremony took place in the Swiss National Park, Zernez, St Moritz, on 31 August 2002.

The text accompanying the award conferred on Jack Ives reads in part:

> Jack Ives' numerous scholarly papers and books, in particular his founding editorship of the journal *Mountain Research and Development* (1981–2000) reveal his impressive expertise and tireless efforts to enhance the knowledge and vision of students, scientists, and political leaders. The book *Mountains of the World: A Global Priority*, edited by Bruno Messerli and Jack Ives and intended for the eyes of the UN General Assembly, met with world-wide approval.

Jack Ives notes that his award is virtually identical to that received by Bruno Messerli—a reflection of their 25-year collaboration as codirectors of the United Nations University's Mountain Programme, and of their contribution to the initiation of Mountain Agenda and Chapter 13 of *Agenda 21* at the Rio Earth Summit.

MRD heartily congratulates Jack Ives and Bruno Messerli on this honor—a fitting tribute to their long efforts and outstanding achievements on behalf of mountains, mountain communities, and mountain research throughout the world.

As a last minute note, MRD would also like to congratulate Bruno Messerli for recently receiving the "Prix Vautrin Lud" at the Festival de Géographie (FIG 2002), which took place in Saint-Dié-des-Vosges, France, in early October. This international award is also known as the "Nobel Prize for Geography."

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