

Editorial

Authors: von Dach, Susanne Wymann, Zimmermann, Anne, and Hurni, Hans

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Dear Readers,

After years of neglect, rural areas are once again in the spotlight of international and national debate and interest. Accordingly, rural development is one of the main priorities of the current cycle (2008/2009) of the UN Commission on Sustainable Development (CSD). Confronted with the challenges of global economic, socio-cultural, political and environmental change, rural development requires new financial and political visions. Moreover, rural development must go beyond policy solely for the agricultural sector. It must aim to maintain the vitality of ecosystems and rural livelihoods through comprehensive development policies and approaches. The European Environment Agency's definition of rural development reflects this: "a) modernisation of farms, b) safety and quality of food products, c) fair and stable incomes for farmers, d) environmental challenges, e) supplementary or alternative job-creating activities, in a bid to halt the drift from the country and to strengthen the economic and social fabric of rural areas, and f) improvement of living and working conditions, and promotion of equal opportunities." Although this is a European agenda, we feel it has validity for mountain regions throughout the world.

Global processes such as increased economic interdependencies, increased cultural influence and exchange, rapid advances in information technology, new governance models, and geopolitical and environmental challenges influence and co-determine the space for rural development in mountain areas. In their papers for the Development section, Gutpa and Franco-Maass et al investigate whether and how global environmental agendas such as nature conservation or clean development mechanisms (CDMs) can either offer opportunities for mountain communities or curtail their development options. The value of agricultural production can be enhanced by better access to national and even international markets, thus contributing to rural development, as shown by Sati and Juyal for women's self-help groups producing organic crops in the Indian Central Himalaya, and by Lightfoot et al for well-informed smallholders benefitting from modern communication technologies in Tanzania. Political and economic transition processes are key factors in determining the rural development of pastoralists on the Tibetan plateau (Foggin) and of rural mountain communities in Romania (Reif et al).

Papers in the Research section also address rural development issues in an era of global change: Winkels discusses the social, economic and environmental impacts of coffee-driven in-migration in Vietnam; Moktan et al analyse aspects of transhumance in Bhutan. Al-Bakri et al present a study of integrative and participatory land use mapping in Jordan. Two papers look at development in rural South African areas: one at poor farmers' harvesting and commercialization of a medicinal plant (Williams and Kepe) and the other at tourism opportunities in two parks with very different financial and organisational resources (Linde and Grab). Tefera and Steerk analyze the impacts of a hydropower dam on land use in Ethiopia. Finally, Lucherini and Merino present the results of a study of herders' and farmers' perceptions of endangered carnivores in Argentina.

We believe that this issue of MRD illustrates the diversity and importance of rural livelihood systems in mountains worldwide, and offers insights into both the challenges and the opportunities that global economic, social, political and environmental change represent for these systems and the communities who depend on them.

Susanne Wymann von Dach and Anne Zimmermann, Associate Editors
Hans Hurni, Editor-in-Chief