

Editorial

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Dear Readers,

Public response to the international climate change debate staged in Copenhagen in December 2009 (COP15) reached an unprecedented level of involvement. Although “NGOs and scientists are largely shell shocked,” as journalist Morten Andersen commented on COP15’s official website, this increased awareness and visibility of environmental and governance concerns is to be welcomed. But were the impacts of climate change in mountains an issue in Copenhagen? Typically, mountains were marginalized: they made it to the scene at side-events. Several important organizations focusing on mountains made sure the voice of mountain communities and researchers was heard, both in the run-up to and during the COP15 conference. The presence of the Mountain Partnership (MP) and of International Mountain Society (IMS) members such as FAO, SDC, MRI, ICIMOD, CDE, and WWF during the conference certainly made an impact on which efforts at various levels can continue to build.

In the MountainNotes section, MRD further supports these efforts by reprinting the synthesis of a multi-authored brochure entitled Mountains and Climate Change: From Understanding to Action. This publication was produced by the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation (SDC) and the Centre for Development and Environment (CDE), and launched during the Copenhagen conference, in the tradition of previous COP mountain publications produced by the “Mountain Agenda” group between 1992 and 2002. Well-known scientists from established mountain organizations worldwide underline that climate change is eminently an issue of governance; in the context of mountains, this translates into a complex multiscale and multicontextual reality, about which there is often a lack of sound data.

Governance of natural resources is indeed particularly important in mountain regions, where populations usually depend mainly on the primary sector and common goods. As demonstrated by Elinor Ostrom, the Nobel Prize laureate in Economic Sciences in 2009, common goods can be used efficiently and effectively if decentralized community-based governance is applied and embedded at other, higher scales of governance. Decisions are best made and enforced based on a comprehensive understanding of institutional frameworks, especially in contexts where global trends are increasingly impacting on local realities, as is the case in mountains. Lessons can be learned from comparative studies. This is well developed in the paper by Sarah Robinson, Mark Whitton, Susette Biber-Klemm, and Nodaleb Muzofirshoev, the first in the MountainDevelopment section in this issue. Entitled “The impact of land reform legislation on pasture tenure in Gorno-Badakhshan: From common resource to private property,” it explores how recent economic and legal changes have been affecting pasture management in this remote region in Tajikistan, and recommends, among other things, that lessons be drawn from experience with tenure legislation in neighboring Kyrgyzstan.

The second paper in the MountainDevelopment section—entitled “Protected areas: A resource or constraint for local people?”—also deals with governance of common goods, exploring local people’s perceptions, knowledge, and attitudes towards conservation planning and management in a protected area in northwestern Pakistan. Muhammad Khan and Shonil Bhagwat conclude that a multistakeholder approach to governance and improved dissemination of information about the objectives of protected area management are crucial for more sustainable management and use of Chitral Gol National Park and its surroundings.

The first paper in the MountainResearch section, by Muhammad Adnan and Dirk Hölscher, also deals with a livelihood-relevant, common goods theme: the authors focus on medicinal plants collected and sold in an area in northwestern Pakistan. Their replicable study of plant abundance contributes to a growing body of literature on the role of plantations for native biodiversity restoration and, more generally, on the preservation of goods and services provided by mountain forests. This study proves that reforestation of degraded sites can contribute to enhancing biodiversity which, if judiciously managed, can benefit the local population.

In their paper on the Chinese Changbai Mountains, an area neighboring the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea (North Korea), Kunshan Bao, Xiaofei Yu, Lin Jia, and Guoping Wang discuss the carbon accumulation of highland peatlands. They underline how important it is to maintain these large and unique peatland areas, as their contribution to the global carbon cycle is significant. The data presented in this paper constitute a useful baseline for global mountain and climate change research.

In the MountainPlatform section, WWF International—one of seven institutional members of the IMS—invited WWF India to present an overview of the results of 2 scientific studies reviewing the state of the art on high-altitude wetlands (HAWs); data gaps are identified in this article, and recommendations offered on the basis of the current study results. The article announces a voluminous scientific report on rarely studied HAWs, soon to be published by WWF.

We hope that the data, insights, and recommendations offered in the present issue of MRD will be of use to our readers and to mountain communities at large.

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