Migration: More than a livelihood strategy for mountain people

Worldwide, one billion people are estimated to be migrants. Most of them – 763 million – have moved within their own country [1] and 258 million [2] internationally. Many are women, men and children from mountain regions. Understanding why they migrate and the social, economic and ecological consequences of their mobility is pivotal to enhancing the benefits and addressing the downsides of migration in mountain areas.

Traditionally, people living in mountain areas have used migration as a strategy to diversify their livelihoods, reduce their direct dependency on natural resources, and adapt to environmental, societal, economic and political pressure [3]. But people have not only been moving away from mountain areas; some have also moved to the mountains, particularly where favourable conditions allowed them to pursue new livelihoods. The last decades have seen substantial changes to the dimension, patterns and dynamics of mountain people’s mobility, with positive and negative implications for mountain societies and ecosystems.

Today, it is increasingly recognized that migration is closely linked with sustainable development, as it contributes significantly to economic and social development in migrants’ places of origin and destinations [4]. International frameworks like the United Nations 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and the Global Compact for Migration aim to reduce reasons for people to leave, to improve the situation of migrants, to enable them to realize their development potential, and to further the governance of migration processes at the local to international levels [5, 6, 7]. Conversely, safe, orderly and regular migration can effectively contribute to achieving the sustainable development goals (SDGs) [6, 8, 9]. However, this latter aspect has received less international and national attention, particularly with respect to mountain areas affected by internal and international migration.
Focus on migration realities in rural mountain regions

In 2012, more than 900 million people lived in mountain regions worldwide; 70 percent of these lived in rural areas [10]. But this is changing: the main trend indicates that people are moving away from rural mountain areas, either to urban centres in the mountains, to lowland areas or abroad – temporarily or permanently. In this publication we therefore focus on internal and international migration dynamics and their implications for rural mountain areas, rather than on the consequences of urbanization for mountain societies and landscapes, as this would merit a separate analysis.

This publication is organized into four parts. Part 1 provides an insight into the drivers and patterns of migration processes. While we cover the range from voluntary to distress migration, we focus less on the forced displacement of people through armed conflict or human rights violations. Part 2 looks at outcomes of migration processes for mountain areas and illustrates these with selected case studies. Part 3 presents good practices that aim to maximize benefits and minimize adverse effects of migration in mountains. In Part 4, we propose four fields of action for integrating migration in policy- and decision-making effectively, for the benefit of rural communities and families with absent members. In doing so, we link the messages to relevant international efforts such as the 2030 Agenda.

Definition of migration

Migration is the "movement of a person or a group of persons, either across an international border, or within a State. It is a population movement, encompassing any kind of movement of people, whatever its length, composition and causes; it includes migration of refugees, displaced persons, economic migrants, and persons moving for other purposes, including family reunification." [11]

For definitions of key terms see the glossary on p. 62.

Multiple drivers, diverse types of mobility

Leaving rural mountain areas

There are several, often intertwined reasons why people leave rural mountain areas (Figure 1). They seek to escape poverty and food insecurity, as agricultural productivity in the rugged topography of the mountains and the sometimes harsh climate is low and pressure on natural resources high. They seek to escape the lack of economic opportunities in remote areas. And they seek to fulfill their aspirations of professional and personal development, in a place that offers access to vocational training and higher education, as well as better social and health services. Some – especially women – migrate for marriage, or to break free from traditional gender roles. People may be forced to migrate due to ethnic and armed conflicts. And increasingly, environmental and climate change and natural hazards add distress to the already precarious situation of small-scale farmers, especially where there is little support for climate change adaptation or for risk insurance. But while climate change impacts are important drivers of migration in mountain regions, they are often not the primary or only ones [12, 13].

Several factors influence the spatial and temporal pattern of people’s movements: their reasons for migrating, their resources, skills and social networks, their distance to urban centres, and the situation at their destination. For many, seasonal mobility during the agricultural lean season in mountains is essential for survival and food security, and is determined largely by the lack of local non-farm livelihood opportunities [3, 14]. In general, but also in mountain areas, international migration is
more likely to occur when connections and support networks are readily available through other migrants or recruitment agencies. In the context of economic globalization, migration movements have changed, with circular migration becoming increasingly widespread. Accordingly, ever-greater numbers of short-term labour migrants commute repeatedly or regularly between their places of origin in mountains and one or several countries of destination. And finally, many migrants from rural mountain areas settle permanently at their new destinations.

Migration processes also vary depending on which member of the household migrates and to what extent people stay connected with their places of origin in mountains. How these processes play out is not only influenced by people’s reasons for migration (education, economic motives, family, environmental constraints, conflicts) but also by the available resources and the migrants’ skills. Apart from migration due to violent conflicts, the majority of migrants are young people, particularly those who move for education, employment or marriage. Often only some members of a family migrate; children, elderly and maybe one adult offspring remain in the place of origin and continue farming activities as far as possible. While migration used to be a predominantly male phenomenon, today increasing numbers of young women migrate internally and abroad. It is often not the poorest of the poor who migrate – especially long-distance – but people who already have a minimum of capital or who can rely on the support of their family and social networks to cover migration costs and facilitate access to job opportunities. When poor people migrate, it is often internally and to take up low-paying, low-skilled work.

Migration patterns in the Peruvian Highlands

Huancayo, the capital of the Junín region in the Central Peruvian Highlands, lies at an altitude of 3,260 m. People living at lower altitudes tend to combine activities in rural and urban areas by having one or several family members commute daily to Huancayo. But for people from the highlands above 3,900 m, daily access to the town is difficult. In their case, it is common for one or more family members to take care of the animals on the communal land in the highlands, while the rest of the household stays in Huancayo to benefit from urban economic and educational opportunities [16].
Moving to rural mountain areas

Newly emerging economic opportunities are attracting people to move to – or move back to – mountain areas. In regions with tourism potential, former migrants return to, and invest in, the mountain community of their birth, or newcomers settle in rural mountain areas with the intention of developing and exploiting new economic niches, such as offering tours or selling regional products (see R. Gracheva et al., pp. 34–35). Similarly, a wave of return migration to quinoa-growing areas in the Bolivian Altiplano was observed during the quinoa economic boom (M. Tschopp et al., pp. 36–37). People also migrate to mountain areas with favourable environmental conditions. This is the case in some tropical countries in East Africa, e.g. in Rwanda and Uganda (J.M.B. Tukahirwa & R. Kamugisha, pp. 54–55), and in mountain zones at lower elevations, such as the Sub-Andean valleys in Bolivia (S. Wymann von Dach et al., pp. 22–23).

Finally, mountain areas in developed countries – which have long experienced depopulation – have seen new migration trends emerge in the last few decades [17]. On the one hand there is “amenity migration”, where people who are usually well-off choose to settle seasonally or permanently. They are motivated by the scenic beauty of the landscape, the peace and quiet, the fresh air and the pure water. The other newcomers are known as the “new highlanders” – they move from lowland urban or peri-urban areas to live and work in mountain areas [18]. They, too, are often well-educated and in possession of financial capital and connections to urban centres. They are entrepreneurially active, engage with their local communities and contribute to the economic and social life of their chosen new locations.