

Migration and Sustainable Mountain Development

Turning Challenges into Opportunities



**Sustainable Mountain
Development Series**

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Cover photo: Providing quality education in mountain areas can help to reduce one factor causing young people to leave their homes in mountains; and should they later decide to migrate, they will be more firmly rooted in their place of origin and better prepared for making a livelihood elsewhere. Children on their way home from school, Laos (BTWImages/shutterstock.com)

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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.

Migrants from rural mountain areas find income opportunities in Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam (J. Krauer)

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 fulfil 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, 15]. In general, but also in mountain areas, international migration is

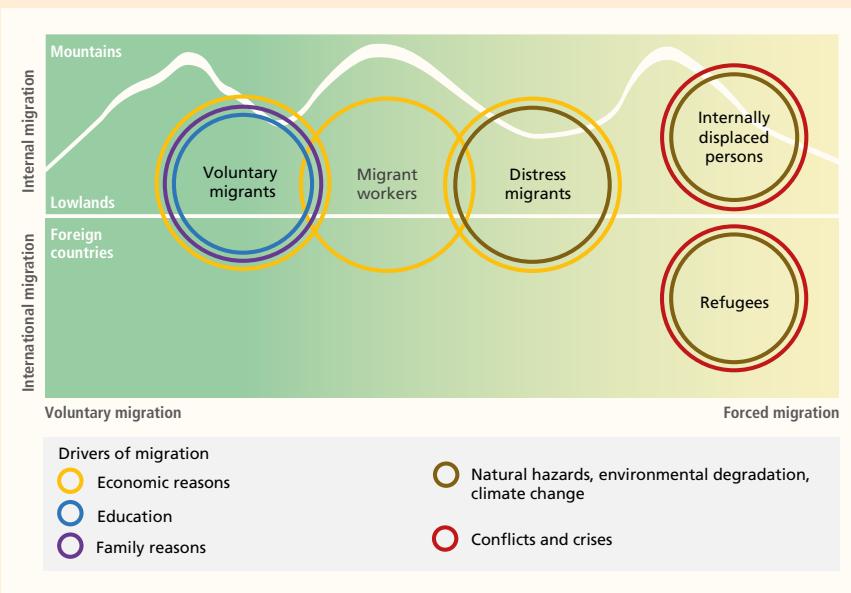


Figure 1. Mountain people's motives for leaving rural mountain areas are influenced by various drivers associated with different degrees of pressure (adapted from [14]).

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].



Small-scale farmers have migrated to this mountainous area in Kenya, where the potential for farming is high. (M. Giger)

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.

Table 1. Outcomes of migration for sustainable mountain development (SMD)

	Opportunities for SMD	Challenges for SMD
Migration from rural mountain areas	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Remittances that secure livelihoods, improve living conditions and facilitate local investment • More resilient livelihood strategies through multilocality • Reduced pressure on natural resources and ecosystems • Potential for technical, social and institutional innovation through new skills, knowledge, attitudes and technologies brought back by migrants • Empowerment of women through changes in responsibilities and power relations within families and communities 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Imbalance of remaining population in terms of gender and age • Lack of labour force increases workload for those remaining (mostly women, children and elderly people) • Lack of skilled people • Lack of labour force impairs agricultural production and sustainable land management, and may lead to land abandonment • New economic disparities in mountain communities • Jeopardizes the delivery and maintenance of social services and infrastructure
Migration to rural mountain areas	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Decreases local labour shortage • Develops economic niches and generates new jobs • Ensures a critical population size to maintain social services • Potential for economic, technical and social innovation • Influx of economic resources and investments 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Increasing pressure on natural resources and social and technical infrastructure • Potential for social conflicts and new social and economic disparities • Integration of newcomers

Remittances and poverty reduction

Remittances are hugely important for the economies of developing countries: in 2011, the money migrants sent home exceeded that of official development aid threefold [3]. Half of the 20 countries with the highest GDP equivalence of remittances in 2017 are countries whose share of mountain areas in the total land area is greater than 50 percent. These countries include the Kyrgyz Republic, which received remittances corresponding to 33 percent of its GDP in 2017, as well as Tajikistan (31 percent) and Nepal (28 percent) [4]. Often, these countries are located near countries with comparatively strong economies or have had other ties with their emigrants' destination countries. Labour migration thus not only has a positive effect on poverty reduction for migrants and their families, but also at the national level of remittance-receiving countries [5, 6]. In Nepal, one-fifth of the reduction in poverty achieved between 1995 and 2004 can be attributed to remittances [7]. Remittance-receiving households are usually more resilient to adverse events: they tend to have more savings and are better able to withstand external economic shocks [3, 8]. Even small remittance transfers are valued by mountain people, helping them to cope with seasonality, food shortages, harvest failure or disease [9]. The health and education-related outcomes of remittances are particularly positive for children [3]. International migration has the potential to generate higher remittances than internal migration, in turn triggering investments in housing, higher education, agricultural innovation, sustainable land management or business development in mountains [10]. However, remittances do not automatically result in substantial and continued improvements in well-being, or investments and innovation in the places of origin [9, 11].

But remittances can come at a cost. They may widen inequality between households with and those without migrating members [12]. Dependence on unreliable remittances may lead to higher vulnerability. Initial migration costs often require



Remittances are invested in Kathmandu and help to generate new income opportunities for workers from rural areas (S. Wymann)

families to take out risky loans, miring households in poverty and excluding the poorest from migrating at all [13]. Whether labour migrants succeed in strengthening their own resilience and that of their families can depend on how well they are embedded at their destination and how precarious their situation there is [14].

Social remittances, capacity development and innovation

Migration can lead to a loss of traditional knowledge and skills crucial to agricultural production in a highly variable mountain environment. But migrants develop “social remittances” – they acquire new skills, knowledge, practices, social capital and identities [16]. This enables them to return with innovative ideas and practices which eventually result in new entrepreneurship, higher incomes, more efficient use of natural resources, social innovation in mountains and, ultimately, in higher resilience to environmental and climate change (S. Thieme & A. Murzakulova, pp. 30–31). And migrants need not return long-term for innovation to occur. Such change can be initiated during transnational and circular migration, or simply through communications between the migrant and the home community via networks and social media. However, migrants’ new attitudes and values can also create tensions with the non-migrating population.

In remote mountain regions, the permanent or temporary absence of high numbers of skilled and educated people may challenge the provision of basic services and the maintenance and improvement of social and technical infrastructure. Nonetheless, remittances invested in capacity development of children and adults may benefit mountain communities in various ways [1, 17]. Migration can play a crucial role in reducing child labour, provided that remittances are high enough to compensate for the loss of household income from withdrawing children from economic activities [18, 19].

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Migration: More than a livelihood strategy for mountain people

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Opportunities and challenges for mountain communities

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New trends in Trans-Himalayan labour mobility

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3 Good practices for a sustainable future

Addressing the causes of migration – and enhancing its benefits

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