

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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Recommendations for policy-making

Migration processes have a profound impact on the social fabric of mountain communities, mountain people's livelihoods and mountain ecosystems. As migration significantly contributes to reducing poverty in mountains, it should be given high priority in development policies and initiatives. But to achieve sustainable mountain development, the needs and challenges of non-migrants must also be addressed.

Migration, with its high economic and social significance and its complex dynamics, strongly affects and shapes development in mountains. Since 2015, several international frameworks have aimed to harness the positive contribution of migration to sustainable development while minimizing the negative. The first international framework to include and recognize migration as a dimension of development was the United Nations 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development [1]. In the 2030 Agenda, two Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) contain targets that directly address migration governance: SDG 8 highlights the need to protect migrant workers (Target 8.8), and SDG 10 calls for facilitating "orderly, safe, regular, and responsible migration", implementing "well-managed migration policies" (Target 10.7) and reducing transaction costs for migrant remittances (Target 10.c) [2, 3]. Targets within other SDGs also affect migration, although more indirectly [1, 3].

Other 2015 frameworks that address migration are the Paris Agreement on Climate Change and the Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction. According to the Paris Agreement, mitigating and adapting to climate change is crucial for reducing the climate change-related causes of migration. The Sendai Framework points out that migration can add to disaster risks but recognizes its role in strengthening the resilience of people and communities.

Coffee production in Laos offers income opportunities for young men from rural areas (S. Bieri)

Most recently, at the end of 2018, the UN endorsed the Global Compact for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration (GCM). This intergovernmental agreement acknowledges that “migration is a multidimensional reality of major relevance for the sustainable development of countries of origin, transit and destination”. It aims to improve the situation of migrants by leveraging “the potential of migration for the achievement of all SDGs” [4, 1].

Supporting the coherent implementation of these international frameworks in mountain regions thus contributes to the sustainable governance of migration processes, and ultimately to sustainable mountain development. A number of countries already have developed tools, strategies and policies that address and mainstream migration. Nevertheless, mountain regions need to get more attention by policy-making.

Addressing the non-migrants in mountains

In promoting sustainable mountain development, the particular needs of those who stay behind in mountain villages should not be forgotten. Families with absentees face specific challenges that must be considered in local, national and regional development planning. At the same time, the continued functioning of local institutions and authorities needs to be ensured despite the absence of a considerable share of working-age people. To ensure these challenges are identified in the first place, we need evidence-informed policy and development approaches. This means gathering and monitoring reliable, disaggregated and mountain-specific data on the dimension, form and outcomes of migration. Where specific policies for sustainable development in mountains exist, they should explicitly address and mitigate the negative outcomes of migration while facilitating the positive.

Four major fields of action for policy-making

To strengthen the benefits and reduce the drawbacks of migration for rural mountain people and communities, we have identified four fields of action for policy- and decision-making:

1. Foster beneficial links between migrants and mountain communities
2. Address the causes of migration: give people less reason to leave the mountains
3. Empower mountain people to cope with adverse effects of outmigration
4. Enable the integration of returnees or of new migrants to the mountains

The 2030 Agenda and several of its SDGs are highly relevant, especially to fields of action 2 and 3: ensuring there are fewer reasons to leave the mountains, and improving the situations of those who stay. However, the SDGs can only be met in this context if they duly consider the priorities of mountain people – not only of migrants, but also of households and communities with absentee members [5]. Localizing the SDGs must therefore take place as an inclusive, multi-stakeholder process [6].

1 Foster beneficial links between migrants and mountain communities

- **Provide reliable information to potential migrants**, putting them in a position to take well-informed decisions on migration. Issues to address: How can they keep in touch with their families and support them? How can they best shape their strategies? What do they aim to bring back home apart from money (e.g. new skills, networks)? What do they need to consider when they want to return home? (Links to: GCM; SDGs 1, 4, 5)



Migration is changing the social structure in rural areas of Nepal (F. Bachmann)



- **Foster a conducive environment for innovations in mountains** by providing legal, administrative and financial support to circular and returning migrants who intend to invest newly acquired skills, knowledge and financial resources in their home communities. (Links to: [SDGs 1, 4, 8, 9, 10, 16](#))
- **Improve the effectiveness of financial remittances** by reducing transaction costs and supporting skill development of migrants and their non-migrant family members, to facilitate entrepreneurship and investments in productive activities. Incentivize the diaspora's investments in the development of their home community by creating fund-matching schemes. (Links to: [GCM](#); [SDGs 1, 4, 8, 9, 10](#))
- **Strengthen the cultural identity of mountain people**, and facilitate the maintenance of social and cultural links between migrants and their home communities by improving transnational and translocal ties (e.g. through radio broadcasts). (Links to: [SDG 10](#))

2 Address the causes of migration: give people less reason to leave the mountains

- **Alleviate poverty by diversifying income-generating opportunities** for women and men within and outside the agricultural sector. Develop infrastructure, improve road and energy access and expand social services. Create a conducive legal and economic environment to strengthen entrepreneurship and business development, to reduce pressure on land and make it more attractive for young people to live in the mountains. Create skill-matching employment for the educated youth in mountain areas. (Links to: [SDGs 1, 3, 5, 8, 9, 10](#))

- **Improve access to, and quality of, education and other basic services in mountains** for girls and boys, women and men. Enhance the provision of higher education and vocational training in rural centres and in professions that can improve living conditions in a rural mountain context. (Links to: [SDGs 4, 5, 8, 10](#))
- **Promote sustainable land management and ecosystem-based adaptation to strengthen mountain people's resilience** and capacity to adapt to climate change through sustainable land management and ecosystem-based solutions. (Links to: [Paris Agreement](#); [Sendai Framework for DRR](#); [SDGs 2, 13](#))

3 Empower mountain people to cope with adverse effects of outmigration

- **In development planning, take into account the specific needs and challenges of families with absent members** [6]. Implement innovative approaches to address the labour shortage and the increased workload and care responsibilities of the people remaining in mountains, specifically women. (Links to: [SDGs 1, 5, 10](#))
- **Secure the legal and customary rights** (e.g. land title, entitlements to common property resources) of the people remaining in mountains, especially women. Improve their access to financial schemes and loans, to maintain and strengthen their ability to decide and act in all important spheres of life. **Ensure a socially agreed and acknowledged handover of responsibilities and tasks** from people leaving for migration to those who remain, to ensure a smooth continuation of services and daily life (e.g. farming). Strengthen the agency of women. (Links to: [SDGs 1, 5, 16](#))
- **Develop innovative solutions to maintain, and possibly improve, the social and technical infrastructure** in mountains (e.g. through paid collective action), and to uphold the functioning of local institutions in the absence of large parts of the population. (Links to: [SDGs 1, 3, 9, 16](#))

4 Enable the integration of returnees or of new migrants to the mountains

- For returning and new migrants to mountain regions, **encourage spatial planning and land use planning to sustainably use the limited space**. This includes reducing pressure on land, mitigating land use conflicts, managing abandoned former agricultural lands (e.g. terraces) and avoiding the establishment of settlements and infrastructure in hazard-prone areas. Facilitate the development of adapted livelihood strategies in close consultation with communities, including migrants and non-migrants. (Links to: [Sendai Framework](#); [SDGs 1, 10, 15](#))
- **Create opportunities for social and cultural exchange between local people and new migrants to mountains or returnees**, to foster impartial and supportive attitudes and peaceful co-existence. Strengthening community networks and learning in this way will eventually lead to win-win-situations. (Links to: [GCM](#))
- **Create a conducive institutional environment to foster innovation and increase income-generating opportunities** that are supported and accelerated by new migrants and returnees, and that benefit the entire local community while promoting sustainable mountain development. (Links to: [SDGs 1, 8, 10](#))



Migrants from the Peruvian Andes maintain cultural ties with their place of origin by returning there for a traditional pilgrimage (S.-L. Mathez-Stiefel)

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1 The multifaceted realities of migration in mountains

Migration: More than a livelihood strategy for mountain people

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Current population and migration dynamics in mountains

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2 Understanding outcomes of migration

Opportunities and challenges for mountain communities

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Migration, multilocality and the question of return in Kyrgyzstan

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New trends in Trans-Himalayan labour mobility

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Gender dimensions of rural–urban migration in Bhutan

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Land abandonment in the Alps affects ecosystem services

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3 Good practices for a sustainable future

Addressing the causes of migration – and enhancing its benefits

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Local solutions create opportunities for sustainable livelihoods in Kosovo

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Swiss mountain villages work to become more attractive to young people

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4 Turning challenges of migration into opportunities

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