

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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Addressing the causes of migration – and enhancing its benefits

Quality education in mountains must go along with income opportunities in mountains to reduce the pressure to migrate, Bolivia (S. Bieri)

Promoting sustainable mountain development means enhancing the prospects of mountain people. As migration has become an inextricable part of life in many mountain regions, this involves supporting mountain communities in making the most of migration while minimizing the risks and social costs. Targeted initiatives and enabling frameworks reduce the pressure to migrate, enhance the benefits from financial and social remittances, increase the well-being of those left behind and promote sustainable land use.

There is no blueprint for safeguarding a rewarding future in mountain areas, where migration is often considered the better – or the only – option. Policies, approaches and interventions must therefore consider the causes of migration, many of which are interwoven. They must create conditions that promote the well-being of mountain communities and ecosystems – and, ultimately, reduce the need to outmigrate. Key to this is improving the local economy and creating jobs, which goes hand in hand with improving access to remote regions, and expanding basic technical and social infrastructure as well as education and health services. Importantly, “soft factors”, such as strengthening mountain people’s cultural identity and identification with their place of origin, should not be neglected.

This publication presents a selection of good practices from different mountain regions in the world. The practices presented enhance the prospects of people living in mountains or support them in making the most of migration.

In Kosovo (see D. Svab, pp. 46–47), developing local value chains and small rural businesses gives mountain inhabitants prospects and reduces the pressure to migrate – and it facilitates return migration. A flourishing local economy has thus

made it possible to work towards sustainable mountain development thanks to the sound cooperation of multiple actors, targeted and inclusive measures, and institutional innovations.

In Georgia, the government introduced legislation to counteract outmigration from mountains through financial incentives. The Law of Georgia on the Development of High Mountain Regions guarantees financial benefits for mountain inhabitants as well as tax exemption for companies registered in mountain regions (N. Shatberashvili & J. Salukvadze, pp. 48–49).

In Switzerland, mountain villages whose future is threatened by the outmigration of young people have launched the “youth-friendly mountain villages” label. The scheme aims to improve prospects for young people in their home municipalities, strengthen cultural identity and promote intergenerational cooperation. The label encourages mountain municipalities to actively heed the needs and aspirations of young people and families, ultimately making mountain regions a more attractive place to live (P. Herrmann & D. Jutzi, pp. 50–51).

In Nepal, financial literacy training has been shown to be successful in reducing a social cost of migration – domestic violence – and it increases the positive effects of financial remittances in the place of origin (P. Fendrich & S. Sapkota, pp. 52–53). Reducing the risks and costs (financial and social) of migration and remittance transfers increases the potential of migration to reduce poverty and to help modernize agriculture and housing. In many cases, better financial management and control enable people to save, which eventually becomes a basis for initiating income-generating activities.

In Uganda, a progressive and inclusive refugee-hosting policy has had positive effects on sustainable land management (J.M.B. Tukahirwa & R. Kamugisha, pp. 54–55). Under the policy, refugees are allocated plots of land on which to put up shelters and grow food, enabling them to start their own businesses and attain some level of self-reliance [1].

It is our hope that the examples contained in this publication can inspire efforts to reduce people’s distress in leaving their mountain homes, as well as efforts to harness the innovative potential of returnees or new migrants to mountains.



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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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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

Recommendations for policy-making

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