

Migration and Sustainable Mountain Development

Turning Challenges into Opportunities



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Development Series

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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Opportunities and challenges for mountain communities

Remittances from their sons in Russia contribute to the livelihoods of families in this village at 2 500 m in Varzob Valley, Tajikistan (B. Wolfgramm)

Migration links mountain communities with lowlands, urban areas and foreign countries. It alters the social fabric and traditional gender roles. Migration reduces poverty – through financial and social remittances – and sparks innovation and transformation in mountains. And migration results in changes in the use of land, with positive or negative consequences.

Migration has diverse outcomes – both on people and on the environment. The extent to which migration affects mountain people’s livelihoods and their resilience depends on their household assets such as land, finances, labour force, education and social networks. It also depends on environmental conditions and the institutional and political context, both national and regional. Migration from and to rural mountains results in opportunities and challenges for sustainable mountain development (Table 1).

Through migration, mountain communities are increasingly connected with places outside the mountains. Migrating community members continue their engagement with their place of origin through their land rights and through formal and informal diaspora associations. Some migrants develop multilocal livelihoods, moving between several places or countries including their original home (see S. Thieme & A. Murzakulova, pp. 30–31; and A. Maharjan, pp. 32–33); others opt to return home as soon as new economic opportunities emerge (M. Tschopp et al., pp. 36–37; and R. Gracheva et al., pp. 34–35). Translocal connectedness [1, 2] is particularly important for mountain people living in remote areas that are difficult to access. Here, having dual residency, carrying out multiple livelihood strategies and maintaining social and cultural ties allow mountain people to remain in their areas of origin, but still be part of and benefit from a larger community spread over multiple locations, even multiple countries.

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



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].

Gender, generations and social cohesion

Migration challenges the social fabric and cohesion in local mountain communities: it redefines the division of labour and responsibilities not only between women and men but also between the generations. Women who migrate from remote mountain regions may gain access to education and careers previously unavailable to them. Returning female migrants can disseminate newly discovered norms of behaviour and practices that improve the position of women in their home community. Sending money back home redefines a migrant woman's role in the household. Having been in a situation of high dependency prior to departure, they are now a financial mainstay for their families [20, 21].

When male members of the family migrate, the women remaining behind in mountain communities face a greater workload, although they also gain more autonomy in decision-making within their families [18, 22]. Besides taking over additional agricultural, land management, family and other tasks, they are alone in taking care of the elderly and their children. In some areas, agriculture has become feminized [23, 24]. Work routines must be reorganized among the remaining household members, between households and at the community level. Decision-making competences shift, particularly in terms of who heads the household, who manages the finances and who attends community meetings. However, despite the fact that women increasingly participate in local committees and resource user groups, they rarely gain long-lasting and real decision-making power at the community level, due to the rigid power structures and the resulting social norms and gender stereotypes (R. Verma, pp. 38–39), [25]). In this respect, the experiences of women differ depending on the type of household (small or extended?), importance of the decision and level of decision-making (household or community?), and duration of absence of male household members. As migrants tend to be young people of working age, the elderly also see their burden increase. Older and thus less physically fit, they are left to care for the family home and land amid a demanding mountainous topography. At the same time, they see their influence eroding, as land ownership, once a symbol of security and authority within the household, becomes less important where migrants contribute a big share of the household income. Consequently, elderly people may feel marginalized and without a say in the family [26].

Environment, sustainable land use and disaster risks

Migration has diverse effects on the environment. Remittances may facilitate investments in improved technologies and sustainable land management. But migration from mountains may lead to labour shortages and a fall in agricultural productivity, resulting in an extensification of land use. This can have positive or negative consequences. On the one hand, it reduces pressure on land and natural resources. On the other, it imperils a well-established agricultural system and eventually leads to land abandonment and shrub encroachment (L. Muheim, pp. 40–41). Soil and water conservation measures such as terraces or irrigation systems fall into disrepair. The neglect of maintenance together with the mountain topography results in more soil erosion, land degradation and disaster risks [27, 28], and can ultimately increase food insecurity [29].

Migration to a mountain environment occasionally leads to competition over the use of natural resources. This is the case in the Mount Kenya region, where the uplands offer more favourable conditions for agriculture than the lowlands, and competition over land and water resources between smallholders and commercial farms is widespread [30]. But, if well-managed and facilitated by inclusive national migration policies, even migration to a highly populated mountain environment can trigger innovative impulses and improvements in terms of sustainable land management (J.M.B. Tukahirwa & R. Kamugisha, pp. 54–55).

Investing in livestock: risks and opportunities

Investing remittances in rural mountain areas harbours both risk and opportunity. Investments in livestock in Kyrgyzstan are a case in point. Socio-economically, labour migration and animal husbandry can complement each other, providing work for daily labourers paid by remittances. But environmentally, the consequences may be negative. Increasing the number of livestock raises pressure on pasture resources, leading to eventual overuse and, in time, land degradation [15].

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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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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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4 Turning challenges of migration into opportunities

Recommendations for policy-making

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Nepal: Migration to mountain cities, lowlands and abroad

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