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Editorial

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Dear Readers,

"Decentralization is becoming ubiquitous," as Arun Agrawal points out in his article. During the 1990s, 63 of 75 developing countries with more than 5 million inhabitants took steps toward decentralization. Is this transfer of authority and responsibility for public functions from the central government to subordinate or quasi-independent organizations also taking place in mountain areas? Are mountain areas particularly good candidates for decentralization initiatives? Are the marginality and fragility of mountain environments, their precarious infrastructure, and their communication facilities adequate to allow decentralization to succeed? Or is it necessary to improve living conditions first, as Ian Cherret argues in his article on a project in Honduras: "Only rural families managing their own resources and generating a surplus will be able to generate a change in the system of governance."

Decentralization is multidimensional and each type—political, administrative, fiscal, and market-oriented—has different characteristics, policy implications, and conditions for success. The topographical, geographical, and economic situations of mountain areas make the challenge of decentralization more complex. This is reflected in the range of articles in the development section of this issue of MRD.

Even if decentralization has the potential to foster sustainable development of mountain communities, we must be aware that it is not a universal solution. Under certain conditions, it allows a response to the challenges confronted by mountain communities, but it can also be a source of stagnation or even an illusory return to the past. In certain countries and under certain conditions, centralized efforts may be more appropriate, as exemplified in the interview with Gao Jianwen.

Decentralization may be one means of promoting sustainable development in mountain areas, while subsidy and subsidiarity are additional tools. The World Mountain Symposium (WMS), to be held in Interlaken, Switzerland, from 30 September to 4 October, will be devoted to the theme "Mountains of the World: Community Development between Subsidy, Subsidiarity, and Sustainability." The WMS should shed additional light on this question.

Several of the research articles in this issue also address problems related to promotion of endogenous development in very different mountain environments. The prosperous Alpine Arc in Europe and the poverty-stricken mountains in countries of the South share a common need to strike a balance between centralized and decentralized strategies.

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