

Editorial

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Dear Readers,

Numerous pathways are being explored around the world to move towards more sustainable development in mountains. Among these is inclusive value chain development—understood as ways of “improving the performance of agricultural value chains ... to benefit large numbers of people,” ie from (often landless and very poor) agricultural laborers and producers to retailers (Devaux et al 2016:8). Inclusive value chain development means, for example, that mountain small-scale farmers are able to offer their value-added products under fair conditions on the market. This requires building trust between a number of stakeholders, addressing power imbalances, offering training, seed money, and participatory processes, as well as ensuring that policies are adapted and institutional change takes place. Inclusive value chain development is increasingly being adopted by governments, donors, nongovernmental organizations, and the private sector to stimulate economic growth while alleviating rural poverty and maintaining healthy agricultural systems in mountain environments. In line with these reflections, the Mountain Partnership launched the Mountain Products Initiative (<http://www.fao.org/mountain-partnership/en/>). This initiative grants a voluntary label to quality mountain products with the aim of promoting small-scale producers' access to markets.

Under what conditions can value chain development successfully contribute to socioeconomic transformation and what trade-offs need to be tackled? Different papers in this Open Issue of MRD explore the linkages between small-scale farming and economic development. The first paper analyses how value chain development was implemented for Himalayan nettle in the remote far-western region of Nepal, and whether it had the desired impact on the lives of women and other marginalized groups targeted by the project. This MountainDevelopment article by Lipy Adhikari and colleagues discusses what worked and why, showing the many steps that led to women's empowerment over 3 years and suggesting that the approach could be upscaled in other Himalayan countries.

The first paper in the MountainResearch section, by Schulz et al, discusses the impact of a long-established but continuously evolving Swiss government policy to maintain high-mountain pasturing in the Alps. Development of value-added products rather than sole reliance on governmental subsidies seems to be key to success, with positive impacts not only on marginalized farmers' livelihoods but also on biodiversity in alpine grasslands. In the next article—an agronomic study of an endangered landrace of runner bean—Giupponi and co-authors argue that agrobiodiversity in the Italian Alps has been maintained thanks to hobby farmers who have continued cultivating the bean and producing local foods; they conclude that legal and economic measures could help save this market-niche product. In the following paper, Rerkasem et al discuss the results of an agricultural experiment in Thailand aiming to promote intercropping of maize with legumes in order to replace the local system of sowing maize after burning vegetation residues; their results show that intercropping is better from both an environmental and an economic perspective.

Livelihoods are influenced today not only by policy and management decisions: the following paper in this issue, by Wangchuk and Wangdi, presents the results of a study of Bhutanese herders' perceptions of climatic changes, showing that a majority of herders report impacts on the environment, on livestock health, and on the communities' herding practices and livelihood systems. Another driver of change—tourism—is explored in the following paper, by Mingyu Yang and colleagues: they analyze the impact of increasing tourism on vegetation patterns in Laojun Mountain National Park, China, observing that non-native plants are spreading with varying speed along roads and hiking trails. They recommend educational and monitoring measures to halt this trend. In the next paper, Magiera and co-authors model the spatial distribution of plant functional groups in Georgian subalpine grassland, comparing the power of various modelling techniques to deliver sound data in a data-scarce area in the Caucasus. The final MountainResearch paper, by Shu Fang et al, provides a large-scale mapping of arid regions in the valleys of southwestern China's largest rivers. Comparing their results with previous (more local) mappings, they conclude that there has been a significant increase in arid lands in the studied valleys and that policy and education measures, supported by further research, are required to achieve sustainable development in these areas.

In the MountainPlatform section, the Afromontane Research Unit (ARU) of South Africa's University of the Free State presents the progress of its research activities in the past 2 years. Its 6 project lines (soon to be complemented by further projects) are all inspired by a transdisciplinary approach, clearly aiming to contribute science for sustainable mountain development.

We wish our readers an inspiring time with these articles.

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