

Editorial

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Dear Readers,

When speaking of mountains and mountain people, we usually think of rural populations and rarely address the issue of urbanization, with all of its opportunities and risks. This, however, is a one-sided perspective. Urbanization can be understood as an increase in the urban character of a geographical area. It is a process that has profound ecological, socio-cultural and economic impacts. Urban areas are becoming increasingly important, especially in Andean countries, where the proportion of people living in such areas is high (Bolivia 62.9 %, Ecuador 63.4 %), as opposed to African or Asian mountain countries, where it is significantly lower (Ethiopia 15.9 %, Nepal 12.2 %, Myanmar 28.2 %). But the trends are similar in both regions: urban areas are growing, and rural areas are being urbanized.

This issue of MRD illustrates some of the typical problems of urbanization in mountain regions. The Development section deals with expansion into fragile or even high risk zones, with accompanying social transformations (Colombia); uncontrolled growth with negative environmental and social impacts (Chile); impacts aggravated by economic opportunity (Costa Rica); and frequently unplanned and unmanaged urbanization (Costa Rica, China). An approach to controlling urbanization in a participatory way in order to avoid environmental and social problems is illustrated in the Kenya Rift Valley. The final article presents an analysis of development paths in the European Alps and a thought-provoking thesis on the future functions of mountain towns that could also be of interest to towns in developing countries trying to move towards more sustainable models of urbanization in mountains.

The Research section also demonstrates the impact of trends in urbanization, through examples that focus on migration and urbanization in Ladakh, and rural employment in China. The MountainNotes section features a contribution that addresses rural tourism in a metropolitan area of China.

Finally, we should not forget that urbanization also presents opportunities. These include better educational infrastructure, integration into markets, off-farm income opportunities, political demarginalization, and reduced pressure on fragile rural areas due to migration, among other things. We encourage our readers to keep these important themes in mind as you examine this issue of MRD.

Hans Hurni, Editor-in-Chief

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