



## **Mountain Agriculture: Opportunities for Harnessing Zero Hunger in Asia. Edited by Li Xuan, Mahmoud El Solh, and Kadambot H. M. Siddique**

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## Mountain Agriculture: Opportunities for Harnessing Zero Hunger in Asia. Edited by Li Xuan, Mahmoud El Solh, and Kadambot H. M. Siddique

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In Beijing in late 2018, FAO's Regional Initiative on Zero Hunger convened the so-called Mountain Consultation (more formally, the International Workshop and Regional Expert Consultation on Strengthening Mountain Agriculture Development and Food Security and Nutrition Governance for Zero Hunger and Poverty Reduction). The presentations and discussions there prompted substantial rethinking of mountain development which, over the subsequent months, culminated in this book. Developed by some of Asia's leading topical experts, this book provides a timely contribution to an area in critical need of further attention by policymakers, development agencies, and the research community: the future of Asia's mountain areas and the people that inhabit them.

While the full implications of the COVID-19 pandemic have yet to become fully apparent, the general trajectory of world development appears somewhat positive as measured against a number of key indicators: poverty rates have generally been in decline, under- and malnutrition are largely in retreat, and the pool of global monetary resources is apparently expanding. Alongside this—and throwing purported achievements in sharp relief against a rather darker background—is the growing gap between the wealthy and the poor, both between nations and within them. While this disparity has received growing attention, comparatively little attention has been paid to the way in which it maps across the altitude gradient: wealth and wellbeing have, in the main, pooled in the lowlands leaving the mountains, as it were, high and dry. As the authors note, while 1 in 8 people globally are food insecure, in mountain areas this ratio jumps to 1 in 2, meaning that food insecurity threatens around 300 million mountain people. That poverty and food insecurity in the mountains have been relatively chronic has, in some ways, kept this from the public eye, as popular attention largely rivets to catastrophic and acute threats in

the more populous lowlands: armed conflict in the breadbasket regions of war-affected states, sea-level rise in low-lying coastal areas, or the tenuous fragility of urban food systems with regard to climate change. In some ways, this is hardly surprising. Both the wellbeing of mountain people and their role in national and global systems have tended to figure largely as subtext in global debate.

This book recalls attention to the mountains, advancing the very important critique that conventional development approaches have not been working in the mountains. While the authors highlight the critical state of these areas, they do not merely cast these places as spaces of immiseration, but rather focus on their significant potential. The authors make the very important but often overlooked point that, as Asia struggles toward the achievement of Agenda 2030's Sustainable Development Goals, underdevelopment and malnutrition in the mountains create a drag on overall success. This suggests that decisive, strategic action in these places may produce profound impact, not only for mountain areas themselves but also for overall transformation toward sustainability.

The book is organized into 4 parts, dealing, respectively, with the overall context of mountain areas (part I), thematic analyses (part II), case studies (part III), and emergent policy recommendations (part IV). Part I focuses on the need for interventions in the mountains, characterizing the status of underdevelopment and malnutrition in these areas and the very important role they play in Asia. It highlights the need for a set of innovations that recurs throughout the book, centering on the development of new paradigms for food production and consumption collectively referred to as Future Smart Food (FSF) systems, founded on underutilized crop species and cultivars that are locally available or adaptable, nutrition dense, economically viable, and resilient to climate change. Part II explores the enabling environment for mountain development, including an assessment of food security challenges, the potential of FSF, integrated farming systems, integrated spatial approaches, value chain development, and Globally Important Agricultural Heritage Systems, culminating in a final chapter that brings these together to recommend policy reforms aimed at overcoming the challenges and barriers that have limited efforts toward Zero Hunger in the mountains. Part III explores specific local contexts and opportunities through country case studies—from Pakistan, India, Nepal, Bhutan, Bangladesh, Myanmar, Laos, and Vietnam—highlighting both shared dynamics, opportunities, and risks, and the divergent, context-dependent character of these on the ground. Part IV brings all of this together into an expansive set of policy recommendations. These recommendations are sweeping in scope, addressing aspects of the socioeconomy, resource governance, crop and livestock systems, research and technology, and regional cooperation.

The technocratic frame of the book—while setting a hopeful and solutions-oriented tone—tends to fend off and subordinate a more expansive account of poverty and underdevelopment in the mountains. In so doing, it also

limits the scope of proposed corrective actions to those that are largely technical in nature. While terrain, remoteness, and lack of connectivity to financial institutions and markets figure prominently as causal factors, relatively less space is devoted to the messy and often contentious political economy of montane Asia. The geopolitical haggling, conflict, and reterritorialization of ongoing processes of state formation and antistate resistance over at least the last century have had a decidedly mountainous focus. From communist and nationalist liberation struggles following the Second World War in China and former Indochina to contemporary Islamic State of Iraq and Syria insurgency on the western extremity of the Himalayas and Myanmar's ongoing civil war on its east, Asia's mountain peripheries have been central to these struggles. These processes of conflict and insecurity are inextricable from questions of poverty and underdevelopment, though the causal relations between the two are undoubtedly complex. Due to these insecurities—as well as relatively low population densities, political marginalization, and abundant resources—developmentalist agendas throughout Asia have continued to characterize mountain regions as resource frontiers, areas wherein local land claims have generally taken a back seat to state-led priorities for (largely extractivist) investment. Underappreciating these realities not only runs the

substantial risk of painting an incomplete picture of the mountains, but may inadvertently function to reproduce the historic structural inequalities that gave rise to them in the first place. Admittedly, the book does call for necessary policy reforms to reshape mountain governance, particularly in Chapter 8. However, the specific policy measures envisioned pertain largely to technical aspects such as financing, production and value addition, market access, and connectivity. It is hard to miss that these proposals and the logic of, for example, China's ambitious One-Belt One-Road (OBOR) agenda—to connect Asia (and the world) through a network of investments and transport infrastructure—are largely cognate. Quite simply, achieving the OBOR agenda necessarily requires not only the subjugation of Asia's mountains as topographic obstacles but also reordering them according to a particular developmentalist vision. Only a very naïve observer would imagine that this agenda will largely benefit mountain peoples.

Notwithstanding, the positive contribution of this book is substantial, outlining practical direction and concrete actions for “doing mountain development better.” At the very least, the authors' clarion call to radically rethink mountain development and recenter mountain people in the development agenda is a call worth heeding.