

## **Sustainable Development and Food Security in Mountainous Areas: The FAO Strategic Response**

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It is a great honour to be with you this morning at the International Symposium on Sustainable Highland Development and Networking. This meeting offers an occasion to reinforce our collective commitment to better the lives and livelihoods of mountain people and to protect mountain environments around the world. I would like to thank in particular our host, the Royal Project Foundation, which has convened this event. The Foundation's commitment to sustainable mountain development highlights the need to build and strengthen alliances between all sectors, and at all levels, to achieve highland agricultural development and food security.

All ecosystems are connected in one way or another to mountains and are affected by them in more ways than can be imagined. Like the oceans and rainforests, mountains are crucial to life. Mountains are the source of up to 80 per cent of the planet's freshwater. They are storehouses of genetic diversity that help feed the world. Around 20 plants supply 80 per cent of humanity's food. Six of them, including maize, potatoes, barley, sorghum, apples and tomatoes, originated in mountain areas. Seven others, namely wheat, rice, beans, oats, grapes, oranges and rye, found new homes in the mountains and evolved into many different varieties.

Yet, as diverse as mountain ecosystems are, in reality mountains are exceedingly fragile. Mountain environments are under threat from the effects of climate change, exploitative mining and unsound agriculture practices. Many mountain people struggle to meet their daily food needs at these high altitudes. Of the world's over 842 million chronically undernourished, a disproportionate number live in mountains. Indeed, according to a recent FAO study on vulnerability in mountains, as many as 245 million rural mountain people in developing and transition countries are at risk of, or actually experiencing, hunger and food insecurity. In this regard, peace is an essential consideration. In 1999, 23 of the 27 major armed conflicts in the world were being fought in mountain regions.

FAO is committed to meet the challenge of sustainable agricultural development and food security in mountain areas around the world. The needs of mountain people are being addressed through programmes on watershed management, livestock production, women's development, prevention and response to food shortages and emergencies, education and many other areas crucial to mountain ecosystems and life. FAO's activities include, among others, the development of mountain legislation at the international and national level. Investigation on nutrition levels in mountain areas is also being conducted. New watershed management and conservation guidelines for highland environments are being produced. Communication networks are strengthened by building a mountain module in the Global Terrestrial Observing System which will link global environmental and socio-economic data for mountain ecosystems.

These various undertakings translate the role of FAO as Task Manager of Chapter 13 of Agenda 21 of the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development. This Chapter is the blueprint for sustainable mountain development that arose out of the Earth Summit, held in Rio de Janeiro in 1992. Ten years after Rio, the United Nations declared 2002 as the International Year of Mountains, in recognition of the crucial role that mountains play in all our lives. FAO was honoured to serve as lead coordinating agency of the International Year of Mountains. Together with other partners including governments, UN agencies and non-governmental organizations, a far-reaching global programme was implemented to raise awareness, share information and knowledge, and stimulate research.

At the country level, FAO supported the establishment of 78 national committees to lead observance of the Year and to initiate concrete action at the country-level to improve mountain environments and livelihoods. This action continues today. In 2004, many of these national committees have evolved into more permanent bodies and are finding lasting solutions to mountain problems. In this regard, they are developing national strategic plans, creating fair policies and laws and implementing agricultural development projects in mountain regions. Thailand was among those countries that made the effort to establish such a committee in order to address sustainable development in mountain regions in a more coherent and effective manner. The Royal Project Foundation, in particular, was instrumental in helping the hill tribes and ethnic communities of Thailand diversify their crops and improve their lives and find alternative livelihoods. Thanks to these efforts, cultivation of opium is reported to have declined by

85 per cent. Nearly 300 upland villages are benefiting directly from the Royal Project's support in strengthening their communities, from the introduction of rice banks to the development of schools, cooperatives and primary health care services. These achievements show that respect for, and inclusion of the cultures, traditions and knowledge of mountain people are key to the sound and sustainable management of land and other resources in mountain areas.

Whether we live at sea level or the highest elevation, mountains are essential to sustain life on earth. Yet, the challenges facing mountain communities and ranges are impressive. No one organization or group of organizations has the expertise, resources and capacity to do all that is needed to bring about the necessary change.

Partnership is indeed essential. Academics, development workers, policymakers, people of many disciplines, and, most importantly, those who live in mountains and are the stewards of mountain ecosystems, must work together to bring about agricultural development and food security. It is only through greater global awareness and cooperation, multi-stakeholder and interdisciplinary approaches, that the future of the world's mountains can be assured.

In this regard, the Mountain Partnership offers a great opportunity and an important new context in which to enhance this cooperation and harness our collective energies for the sustainable development of mountain regions. Launched at the World Summit on Sustainable Development held in Johannesburg, in 2002, the Mountain Partnership is a voluntary alliance of more than 100 members including countries, intergovernmental organizations, civil society and the private sector dedicated to improving the lives of mountain people and protecting their environments. As of September 2004, already 42 countries, 14 inter-governmental organizations and 50 major group organizations had joined the Mountain Partnership, and the numbers are expected to continue growing. FAO is bringing its technical expertise and experience to the Partnership and is currently hosting a Secretariat to support it.

The Mountain Partnership is improving the impact and effectiveness of the efforts in mountain development. It is bringing people together to bridge gaps in knowledge and expertise, identify opportunities for collaboration and connect those who need assistance with those who can provide it. The activities carried out on the ground in the framework of the Partnership are guided by the recommendations of the World

Summit on Sustainable Development. They cover specific themes like sustainable agriculture and rural development in mountains, policy and law, sustainable livelihoods, watershed management, research, gender, education. They also span across different geographic areas such as the Andes, East Africa, Central Asia and the Hindu Kush Himalaya. To take just one example, members of the Sustainable Livelihood Initiative are now developing a collaborative programme to produce fair trade organic coffee with farmers in the highlands of East Africa. This initiative, involving a private sector company, the Government of Kenya and local communities, will link the producers directly with coffee importers in North America, thereby ensuring a much higher financial return to the farmers, even with globally depressed coffee prices.

This Symposium will certainly consider ways and means to strengthen further the international network of shared learning, support and commitment to sustainable highland agricultural development, in line with the mission of the Mountain Partnership. I am convinced that these efforts, energies and vision will make a valuable contribution to achieving agricultural development and food security in mountain areas and beyond. FAO looks forward to continuing to work together with all of you in reaching these goals.