Vibrant Mountain Communities

Regional Development in Mountains:

Realizing Potentials, Tackling Disparities

Sustainable Mountain Development Series

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Messages for policy-makers

The future of these young women in Laya, Bhutan depends not only on their own capabilities but also on the concerted actions of regional and national policy-makers
(A. Treadway/ICIMOD)

To leave no one and no region in mountains behind calls for concerted policy action. Despite progress, mountain regions continue to lag behind lowland areas in many respects: poverty incidence is high, employment options are limited and public services fragmented – and mountain regions are often politically marginalized. Mountain dwellers are especially vulnerable to global change and many, mainly young people, are migrating. But the unique social capital and cultural heritage of mountain communities, and the ample natural assets of mountains, offer prospects for development. Targeted policy interventions can unlock these potentials and lead to development pathways that enhance the well-being of all, foster sustainable and inclusive economies, and strengthen the resilience of communities and ecosystems in mountain regions.

The good practices presented in this report have identified three promising levers for transformation of mountain regions: inclusive planning and decision-making, equitable access to quality public services, and collaborations to spark innovation. Using these levers, which are described in more detail below, would benefit people living both in mountains and the adjacent lowlands, and thus drive progress towards a jointly agreed regional vision. It is important that such interventions are guided by sustainability principles, and that they focus on a region's opportunities and address its challenges (Ruiz Peyré et al., pp. 14–15).

Regional development processes require multistakeholder partnerships and collaboration across sectors, between public, private and civil society actors. In the following, we outline how three groups of key development actors can help to shape interventions and create enabling conditions for the three levers to work ef-

Figure 1. A regional vision based on principles and on the potential of a mountain region can guide sustainable and inclusive development; investing in levers promotes the transformation. To ensure success, certain enabling conditions must be met
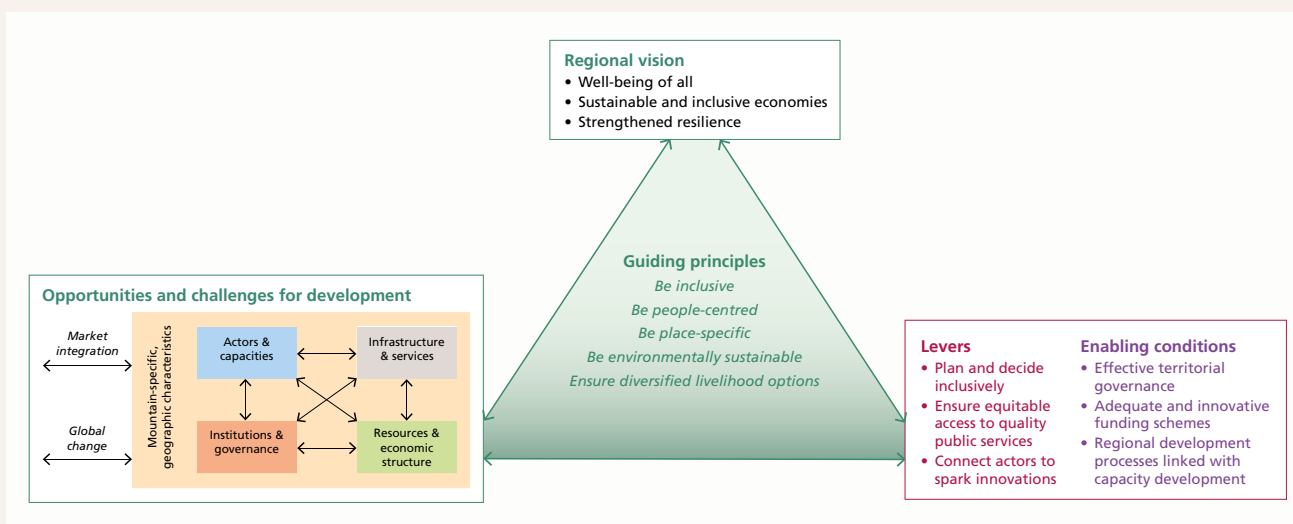
fectively (Figure 1). These groups of actors are: policy-makers at the national level, regional actors (e.g. government actors at subnational levels, non-governmental organizations or civil society organizations) and donors (not only international, but also government agencies that provide funding for regional development in mountains). The actions proposed in the right-hand column below, while by no means comprehensive, provide an entry point for the engagement of these key actors in regional mountain development.

Three levers for transformation

Plan and decide inclusively	Recommended action (who/what)
Develop a joint regional vision and development scenarios to guide and coordinate actions of all involved actors from the local to the national level. Key to designing context-specific development pathways and scenarios are: common visions rooted in the region's culture, social capital and proactively considering the dynamic context and global trends. A common goal enhances actor ownership and forms a strong foundation for a more self-determined socio-economic development. It is particularly important that vulnerable social groups (e.g. women, the elderly or indigenous communities) participate in such processes effectively and that their agency is strengthened. In Laos, villagers who were engaged in land use planning complied with the resulting plan (Hett et al., pp. 18–19).	• Regional actors *facilitate the multistake-holder process.* • National policy-makers *provide an enabling framework.*
Focus on potentials and the uniqueness of a region to increase the chances of successful regional development and to strengthen the region's self-reliance and identity. An enabling environment that equally allows mountain women and men to make use of their knowledge, skills and the region's unique resources is a key step towards developing quality products. Products that have a chance on the competitive market (both national and international) can thus help to diversify mountain people's income, as shown by the pro-poor value chain of native potatoes in the Andes (Devaux et al., pp. 32–33). It is important that the commodification of resources does not impair local food security or lead to an unequal distribution of labour, but that it offers opportunities to reduce poverty.	• Regional actors, national policy-makers and donors *shift perspectives on opportunities with special attention to marginalized regions and groups.*
Implement adaptive planning approaches to harness emerging opportunities, address potential trade-offs and respond to disruptive changes such as the COVID-19 pandemic [1]. It is essential to monitor the outcomes and impacts of regional development processes and external drivers that affect the different social groups, particularly the most vulnerable, and mountain ecosystems. Incorporating flexibility and scope for adaptation in planning and decision-making processes enables mountain communities to respond to changing conditions and to strengthen their resilience, as in the Kangchenjunga region (Chettri et al., pp. 36–37).	• Donors at all levels and regional actors *allow for flexibility in the set-up of interventions.*

Ensure equitable access to quality public services	Recommended action (who/what)
Improve supply and quality of public services to meet the needs of mountain people. This is key for regional development. Reliable and place-specific services enhance trust and provide transparent conditions, both of which are crucial for long-term investments. In Ethiopia, for example, the social accountability programme led to improvements in the agricultural extension service, a prerequisite for development in the highlands of Ethiopia (Tafesse, pp. 24–25).	• *Regional actors consciously consider the needs of different social groups.* • *National policy-makers decentralize decision-making along with adequate funding.*
Invest in, and make use of, information and communication technology (ICT) to improve local opportunities, the quality of life in mountain areas and a region's at-tractiveness, also for young people, as in the Aosta Valley in Italy (Dax et al., pp. 40–41). Combining decentralized physical facility hubs with online services increases people's access to essential information and services, which is particularly important in dispersed settlements with a low population density. ICT solutions need to pay special attention to marginalized groups and their capabilities to develop capacity in using ICT. Telemedicine, e-government and online agriculture extension services have improved local opportunities and the quality of life in mountain areas.	• *Regional actors pay attention to the needs of marginalized groups and foster ICT implementation.* • *National policy-makers set targets and provide incentives and funding.* • *Donors provide funding for new ICT-based solutions.*
Promote and recognize social innovations to complement service delivery by the public sector. New forms of cooperation among civil society – but also between mountain communities, the private sector, and local and regional government – can create place-specific solutions and address gaps in service provision, for example in health care, as shown in the Swiss case (Tschumi & Mayer, pp. 28–29).	• *Regional actors value social innovation and support its development and imple-mentation.*

Connect actors to spark innovations	Recommended action (who/what)
Build on indigenous and local knowledge and external expertise to promote co-creation of novel ideas and added-value products. Combining new forms of collaboration with product development can diversify options, overcome challenges of scaling up and open up new economic opportunities. Appropriate management, as shown by the example of the Grosses Walsertal in Austria, facilitates the identification of needs, promotes the generation of innovative ideas and seeks adequate funding (Kratzer et al., pp. 34–35).	• *Regional actors connect actors with complementary knowledge and skills.*
Stimulate and use synergies across sectors to link equitable socio-economic development with sustainable management of moun-tain ecosystems, and to efficiently and effectively use the limited financial resources. This requires coordination and collaboration across sectors, as in north-western Albania (Gjika & Imami, pp. 20–21).	• *Regional actors link actors across sectors and levels.* • *National policy-makers collaborate across sectors.*
Empower local entrepreneurs in building and diversifying networks to enable value chains that are beneficial for all parties involved, such as farmers, cooperatives or local businesses and external actors. The transboundary cooperation in the Himalayas helped to diversify tourism and increase the benefit to the local popula-tion (Chettri et al., pp. 36–37). In addition, a robust network based on a wide range of products reduces dependency and increases the resilience of mountain communities. This is particularly important in cases of disruptive change such as the COVID-19 pandemic or natural hazard-related disasters in the context of climate change.	• *Regional actors link farmers and small-scale entrepreneurs with potential "customers".* • *National policy-makers provide an enabling framework.*

Three enabling conditions for the above levers to work effectively

Effective territorial governance	Recommended action (who/what)
Employ mountain-specific policy instruments to take advantage of a region's assets and address its critical issues. Such instruments can be specific policies and laws, such as Georgia's mountain law (Tkeshelashvili & Nowakowska, pp. 38–39). But also national development strategies as well as government reforms can effectively strengthen good governance in regions and allow for people-centred and place-sensitive solutions. Such national efforts can include decentralization or self-governance reforms, as in Armenia (Janazyan & Mkrtchyan, pp. 26–27).	• National policy-makers *develop and effectively implement policies tailored to mountain regions.*
Ensure long-term engagement to promote trust building, support political negotiations and complex decision-making across different levels and sectors, as well as experimentations with creative new ideas. Such regional development processes go far beyond short-term project interventions, as shown by the example of Shkodra district in Albania (Gjika & Imami, pp. 20–21).	• Regional actors, national policy-makers and donors *support programmes that consist of several project phases.*
Implement committed regional management bodies to facilitate and coordinate regional development processes, as in the Grosses Walsertal in Austria (Kratzer et al., pp. 34–35). These bodies can be either state actors or non-state actors, or ideally a combination of the two. They should have a clear mandate, sufficient capacities and competences, and adequate funding. They may facilitate the co-development of regional visions, policies and strategies; promote bilateral and multilateral cooperation; and support lobbying. Such a facilitating body must enjoy the trust of all stakeholders, a factor that is particularly important in mountain regions with a high diversity of different social groups, or with scattered communities who have not yet been engaged in efforts across village or country boundaries.	• National policy-makers *implement effective decentralization.* • Regional actors *have the persuasive power and trust to coordinate and support actions.*

Adequate and innovative funding schemes	Recommended action (who/what)
Allocate funding for both strategy development and concrete actions to effectively implement the regional strategy. A funding basket which is stocked up by different government agencies, international cooperation agencies, charities and private sector funds would ease the financial burden for each actor and enhance their commitment to the process over a sufficiently long period. Funding programmes should be gender- and generation-sensitive, taking into account the specific needs of vulnerable social groups, as in the Kangchenjunga Landscape (Chettri et al., pp. 36–37).	• Donors and national policy-makers *earmark funding both for the development of mountain-specific policies and strategies and for action on the ground.* • Regional actors *support projects that contribute to the regional vision and strategy.*
Provide seed money for innovative projects to trigger additional financial resources. Often local farmers, engaged citizens, small-scale entrepreneurs or community-based organizations are creative and have innovative ideas, but lack the capital for implementation. Traditional financial institutions are often reluctant to invest venture capital in rural mountain areas with a potentially low return on investment in the short term. The experience in Georgia shows that innovative funding schemes providing seed money and complemented by the actors' own resources are effective (Tkeshelashvili & Nowakowska, pp. 38–39).	• Donors at all levels *fund innovative funding schemes that spark innovative ideas.* • Regional actors *have the capacity to set up transparent schemes and back innovative projects.*

Regional development processes linked with capacity development	Recommended action (who/what)
Empower local actors, including marginalized social groups to effectively participate in regional development processes and enhance their negotiating power, as in the Andes (Devaux et al., pp. 32–33). This will enable them to negotiate fair prices for their mountain products, decent working conditions and equal labour sharing within households and communities. This helps to proactively address the risk of unequal workload and payment that is often connected with commercialization of agricultural mountain products.	• Regional actors *coach marginalized social groups.* • National policy-makers *implement policies that ensure fair prices for producers and safe working conditions.*
Enhance local, regional and national government capacities to promote and facilitate integrated and inclusive development in mountain territories. Coaching local and regional authorities increases their competences in multilevel and cross-sectoral planning and implementation, and ensures effective local governance, as in the Shkodra region in Albania (Gjika & Imami, pp. 20–21).	• National policy-makers and donors *consciously engage in capacity development at all levels.*
Establish institutional mechanisms for informing regional development policies through bottom-up approaches to strengthen mountain regions' position in national policy processes. Multilevel regional development processes that are informed by sound evidence on the mountain regions' potentials and specific challenges offer joint learning for all those involved – from local to regional and national levels. In the Hindu Kush Himalaya region, involving actors from the central level was crucial for finding transboundary solutions (Chettri et al., pp. 36–37).	• Donors *support advocacy efforts.* • Regional actors *have the persuasive power to bring together actors from all levels.* • National policy-makers *pay attention to remote – but potentially rich – mountain regions.*

Concerted efforts are needed to support the sustainable development of mountain regions. Policies and strategies that focus on the above levers, and that address the unique strengths and weaknesses of these regions, can help to steer them onto promising development pathways. Taking care to ensure that the enabling conditions are in place – effective governance, funding and capacity development – will provide a robust framework to leverage a transformation. Paying special attention to the guiding principles described in this publication – being inclusive, people-centred, place-based, environmentally sustainable and offering diversified livelihood options – will help to achieve a region's vision. Designing policies and strategies – and implementing them – with the above points in mind can drive progress on the 2030 Agenda [2] in mountains, in countries as a whole and globally.

References and further reading

[1]   ICIMOD (International Centre for Integrated Mountain Development). 2020. *COVID-19 impact and policy responses in the Hindu Kush Himalaya*. Kathmandu, Nepal, ICIMOD. https://lib.icimod.org/record/34863.

[2]   United Nations. 2015. *Transforming our world: The 2030 Agenda for sustainable development*. New York, NY, USA, United Nations. https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/content/documents/21252030%20Agenda%20for%20Sustainable%20Development%20web.pdf.

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