

The Mountain Forum: Learning to communicate within a pluralistic network

Elizabeth A. Byers

The Mountain Institute, Franklin, USA

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ebyers@mountain.org

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Contents

Abstract

Introduction

Evolution of the Mountain Forum

A stone dislodged

Legitimizing the niche

Catalyst

Sun on the snow: synergy builds

A pluralistic avalanche

How does the Mountain Forum Function?

Governance: Letting go in a complex system

Mountain peoples, professionals, and organizations

Multiple goals, perspectives and values

Changing environments and roles

A kaleidoscope of methodologies

Early Impacts

Innovation

Shifting the balance of power

Professional growth and empowerment

Organizational changes

Policy development

Information system indicators

Lessons Learned

Enabling factors

Communication, hierarchy, and absent stakeholders

Role of the internet

Sustainability

Conclusion: Explorers and Pilgrims

References

Tables

Table 1. Mountain Forum membership profile

Table 2. Impacts related to professional growth and information sharing

Table 3. Information system indicators

Abstract

The Mountain Forum is newly formed global network in support of equitable and ecologically sustainable mountain development. Its creation and experiences during its first 18 months of operation reveal a number of insights regarding information structures, cooperation between organizations, empowerment, and pluralism.

Influential factors in the development and operation of the Mountain Forum include a participant focus on vision, enlightened leadership, individual dedication, and a willingness to break out of familiar knowledge spheres and hierarchical governance structures.

The early impacts of the Mountain Forum have included innovative policy development, increased visibility for mountain issues, increased visibility for organizations working in mountainous regions, and a growing sense of community among participants. The multiplicity of voices and issues that have been heard through the Mountain Forum has created a new and commonly-held awareness of the set of social and environmental issues facing mountain regions today, and a diverse array of promising mechanisms for addressing them.

Major challenges still faced by implementers of the network include dealing with the lack of hierarchical structures, organizing complex information flows, language and access difficulties, and the absence of certain stakeholder groups.

Introduction

Mountain peoples are experts at integrating multiple ecological perspectives. Living in complex, dynamic, and often hazardous ecosystems, and surviving on a richly varied but fragile resource base, traditional mountain cultures learned early to diversify their objectives and methodologies. The need for communal action to maintain the most basic infrastructure (agricultural terraces, trails, river crossings) in the face of natural hazards pushed mountain societies to nurture strong, multi-stakeholder cooperative resource management strategies based on high levels of social and human capital.

The above scenario is rapidly deteriorating as communication and transportation networks bring once isolated mountain regions into full collision with the developed world. Resource management systems, which may have once been sustainable in these fragile environments, are inadequate in the face of contemporary pressures.

A new meaning for pluralism in the context of mountain environments is needed - one which embraces the full range of actors in a complex global

stakeholder group, while still recognizing the essential ecological characteristics of mountain ecosystems, and the contributions and legitimate rights of mountain peoples. This paper tells the story of a new organization that supports equitable and ecologically sustainable mountain development through a participatory learning and communication network: the Mountain Forum. The questions addressed by this paper center on the theme of learning how to communicate in a pluralistic network, using the Mountain Forum as a case study, and include:

How can an information structure be created that values multiple perspectives, and gives a platform to marginalized groups? Is it possible to "let go" of structural control while still maintaining the core functions of a network?

What factors operate to undermine or enable pluralistic communication and why? What are the impacts of this type of communication on organizational relationships, policy development, and social capital?

In the context of these questions, this paper traces the evolution of the Mountain Forum, describes the current function of the network, and summarizes some of the early impacts. Finally, the challenges faced and lessons learned during the first year and a half of operation are briefly outlined.

Evolution of the Mountain Forum

How is a pluralistic network formed? In other words, how do organizations and individuals move beyond their familiar circles of communication to create an information structure that accesses and values multiple perspectives? How can an equitable platform be given to many stakeholders, including marginalized groups? The evolution of the Mountain Forum reveals a number of insights in response to these questions. The following sections describe the processes which led to the formation of the Mountain Forum.

A Stone Dislodged

Though he did not live to see the broad-reaching consequences of his efforts, Carl Troll took the first institutional step toward creating a global dialog on mountains when he founded the International Geographical Union's Commission on Mountain Geoecology on 1968. For the next twenty years, a small but dedicated international group of mountain scholars worked together to promote recognition of the importance of mountains and mountain peoples. They mentored a generation of graduate students who subsequently moved into positions in academia, government, and development assistance circles. A core set of international research programs with a mountain focus was initiated, including UNESCO's MAB-6 and the United Nations University's project on Mountain Ecology (Ives, 1997).

Legitimizing the Niche

The worldwide maelstrom of energy and publicity that preceded the 1992 Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro was a tremendous opportunity for environmental groups of all kinds to highlight their policy agendas and form new alliances. In a bold move, several small mountainous countries joined with the close-knit group of mountain scholars (Carl Troll's legacy) to create a policy agenda for mountains. A book, a policy paper, dedicated lobbying, brilliant politicking, and perhaps some inner appeal of the topic itself created a niche for mountains (Stone, 1992; Mountain Agenda, 1992; Messerli and Ives, 1997). Chapter 13, entitled "Managing Fragile Ecosystems: Sustainable Mountain Development", was incorporated into Agenda 21 and endorsed by the largest-ever gathering of heads of state and government (UNCED, 1992).

For the first time, mountains appeared on the global environment and development agenda. New bureaucratic reinforcements joined the Mountain Agenda group. The United Nations appointed a Task Manager to coordinate official follow-up for each chapter of Agenda 21. The Task Manager's role for the mountain chapter was given to the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO).

Catalyst

Meanwhile, mountain peoples' organizations and NGOs were quietly working, each in their own isolated mountain region, and all around the world. For two years, the mountain chapter of Agenda 21 lay essentially dormant. Then, in 1994, FAO organized the first Inter-agency Task Force meeting to discuss and plan follow-up activities for Chapter 13, deliberately choosing a pluralistic approach to organizing this event. In addition to UN agency representatives and the core group of scholars and policy-makers who had legitimized the Mountain Agenda at the Earth Summit, FAO sought out the NGO community. The inclusion of NGOs, provision of a platform, and the cross-sectoral dialog that ensued proved to be a catalyst of unexpected proportions.

Sun on the Snow: Synergy Builds

Following the first Task Force meeting hosted by FAO, mountain-focussed events at the global level began to follow one after another. A second workshop, with a similarly cross-sectoral participant group, was convened by an international NGO (The Mountain Institute) in order to prepare for a larger global consultation.

The International NGO Consultation on the Mountain Agenda was held in 1995 in Peru, bringing together 110 organizations from 40 countries. Outcomes included policy recommendations, a collaborative delegation to the UN Commission on Sustainable Development in April 1995, and the call for an on-

going mechanism to continue to the cross-sectoral communication. This diverse group of mountain leaders understandably felt that the mountain chapter of Agenda 21 needed to include the views of a much broader stakeholder group:

While the inclusion of mountain ecosystems is a significant accomplishment, this chapter was drafted late in the UNCED process and could not benefit from the full participation of NGOs and people working in the world's remote mountainous regions. Therefore, the mountain community felt a strong need to come together to build consensus toward concerted action on the Mountain Agenda (TMI, 1995a:2).

This group developed a prioritized action plan for sustainable mountain development in nine thematic areas, delivered to the UN Commission on Sustainable Development (CSD) in April 1995. Many of the recommendations were incorporated into the text of the CSD's report on Chapter 13 of Agenda 21. It has since been widely disseminated within the mountain community and, along with Chapter 13, has formed a starting point for new policy initiatives. The innovative cross-sectoral partnership which resulted in the CSD's acceptance of the prioritized action plan was hailed as one of the "salient achievements" of the meeting by the Under Secretary-General of the UN Department for Policy Coordination and Sustainable Development (TMI, 1995b:2).

Another cross-sectoral workshop saw the birth of the Mountain Forum, a global network in support of equitable and ecologically sustainable mountain development. The network consists of a loosely-held coalition of organizations with no identifiable center. The Swiss Agency for Development Cooperation provided essential funding for the first phase. An unusual history of cross-cutting alliances and mature leadership, where institutions or individuals with relatively more power stood aside, allowed the issues themselves to take center stage through a multiplicity of voices (Kaczmariski, 1996a).

A Pluralistic Avalanche

With the creation of the communications network of the Mountain Forum, initiatives and issues around the world were suddenly made visible, and a proliferation of new activity followed, which created a veritable avalanche of events. An unprecedented attention to mountain issues resulted as the global mountain constituency "discovered" itself and began to connect for the first time. People became aware of regional intergovernmental and NGO meetings that were taking place as part of the follow-up to Chapter 13 of Agenda 21. New networks and sub-networks, nascent NGOs, community initiatives, newly designated government focal points, university courses, research programs, and even a new vocabulary began to emerge. Community groups and project implementers connected across mountain ranges, and their lessons learned began to inform a global constituency.

The "avalanche" may be pictured, beginning with a few hardy mountain scholars, through perhaps a dozen institutional advocates during the Earth Summit, to a period of intergovernmental (FAO) leadership and expanding growth. Finally, the whole mountainside appears to be moving as NGOs join in the collaborative and continually shifting leadership of the mountain agenda process, and the Mountain Forum emerges to connect the new constituencies.

How does the Mountain Forum Function?

The Mountain Forum is a diverse and non-hierarchical network of networks. Its purpose is to provide a forum for mutual support, exchange of ideas and advocacy for mountain peoples and environments (TMI, 1995b).

Governance: Letting Go in a Complex System

The purpose of focusing on plurality is to take into consideration the jumble of ongoing activities and, rather than trying to gain control over them, to instead choose niches and to identify common concerns where different approaches may lead to synergy (Christoplos and Nitsch, 1996: 44).

A deliberate decision to stand back, and let go of control was made by the Initial Organizing Committee of the Mountain Forum. Learning to operate within a participatory and non-hierarchical governance structure has been critical to the success of the network to date.

The organizational structure of the Mountain Forum defies standard graphical representation, and calls for new kinds of images. Jane Pratt, President and CEO of The Mountain Institute (convener of the Initial Organizing Committee) has used the analogy of outer space to describe it. Stars (participating organizations) are scattered through the cosmos, loosely linked through gravitational attraction, some more closely than others (Kaczmarek, 1996b:29).

The somewhat indigestible governance language in the paragraph below refers to "facilitating committees" and "conveners", a vocabulary that resulted from vigorous efforts on the part of the Initial Organizing Committee to avoid centralization of power.

An Interim Facilitating Committee (newly renamed the Mountain Forum Council), comprised of representatives from Regional Facilitating Committees, a Global Facilitating Committee, and an Information Server Node meets biennially to review progress and plan future cooperation. An Executive Committee (newly renamed the Secretariat), consisting of three rotating representatives from the Mountain Forum Council, takes responsibility for activities requiring joint action in the interim periods (Mountain Forum, 1997b). Regional Facilitating Committees are convened by the Regional Nodes, and

serve to mobilize regional activities and networks. The Global Facilitating Committee is convened by the Global Node, and serves to mobilize global activities. Each node has a separate convening organization, so that day-to-day activities are carried out by a loose confederation of organizations. In addition, sub-regional nodes, local NGO networks, micro-networks (within organizations), and individuals cooperate in a wide variety of ways within the Mountain Forum.

The governance language and structure of the Mountain Forum, while sometimes confusing, serves the intended purpose of limiting central control. At the November 1997 meeting of the Mountain Forum Council, many participants expressed approval of the vague language and consequent lack of central governance. The organization was perceived to be working, while remaining flexible and allowing a poetic principal of self-determination for each region (Espie, 1997, pers. comm.).

Regional nodes have been established for the Asia-Pacific region (at the International Center for Integrated Mountain Development, Kathmandu) and in Latin America (at the International Potato Center, Lima). They sponsor a variety of networking activities such as workshops, a printed bulletin, email or World Wide Web networking, radio information services, documentation centers, training opportunities, and support of sub-regional nodes.

In Europe, an NGO steering committee was formed in July 1996, following the European NGO Consultation on Sustainable Mountain Development, for the purpose of convening a European Mountain Forum. Because of the large amount of interest and activity in European mountains, this committee has been both more democratic and slower in organizing, and a regional node is not yet formally established. In Africa and North America, progress is still at an early stage in terms of convening regional nodes.

The global node of the Mountain Forum is convened by The Mountain Institute, and serves to coordinate members of global organizations and non-regionally affiliated members. The global node also acts as an interim node for Europe, Africa, and North America, until these can be handed to regional convening institutions.

Supporting and connecting all participants is an Information Server Node (hosted by The Mountain Institute) which provides internet and limited hard-copy networking access. Moderated email discussion lists, electronic conferences, World Wide Web pages, a calendar of events, and an on-line mountain library form the core of electronic services. Printed materials include a twice-yearly bulletin, an indexed membership directory, and proceedings of the electronic conferences (Byers, 1997).

Mountain Peoples, Professionals, and Organizations

As an innovative and integrative bridge between diverse constituencies, the Mountain Forum is committed to having a completely open and broad membership. It includes mountain communities, non-governmental organizations, scholars, researchers and research initiatives, individuals, groups and institutions, private associations and organizations, and intergovernmental and governmental bodies. Since the network is largely member-driven, it is interesting to note just who the members are. A profile of the membership as of November 1997 is shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Mountain Forum Membership Profile as of November 1997, for a total of 473 members (multiple answers were accepted; therefore, totals are more than 100%; Source: TMI, 1997a):

Institutional Affiliation

University/Research:	37%
NGO (university-affiliated)	32%
NGO	28%
Private Sector	13%
Government	9%
No affiliation	7%
Intergovernmental	6%
Donor	5%
International NGO	4%

Type of Work

Research	63%
Project Implementation	44%
Policy development	39%
Teaching	28%
Activism	18%
University studies	13%
Administration	13%
Other	14%

Regional Interest

Africa	10%
Asia-Pacific	44%
Europe	29%
Latin America	30%
North America	26%
Global	22%

Relationship to Mountains

Mountain inhabitants	24%
Visitors or users	24%
Interested in mountains	40%
Professionals working in mountains or on mountain issues	72%

Geographic Extent of Work

One particular mountain	4%
One mountain range	29%
Several mountain regions	36%
Mountains in general	29%

Multiple Goals, Perspectives and Values

The vision, mission, and values of the Mountain Forum are conceptually broad, and the multiplicity of actors and relationships involved in its implementation make interpretation of that mission broader still. As stated in the Report of the Initial Organizing Committee:

Vision, Mission, and Values:

The Mountain Forum is an innovative and integrative bridge between diverse nongovernmental, governmental, intergovernmental, scientific, and private sector organizations and individuals. The purpose of the Mountain Forum is to provide a forum for mutual support and for the exchange of ideas and experiences. This will empower participants to raise mountain issues on local, national, regional, and international agendas and to promote policies and actions for equitable and ecologically sustainable mountain development. The basic operational values of the Mountain Forum are to be open, democratic, decentralized, accessible, transparent, accountable, and flexible (TMI, 1995b).

How might this mission statement be interpreted by the Mountain Forum's different stakeholders? Local NGOs and communities, for example, could view this as a call for increased local control of resources as well as improved access to outside resources. The development community may interpret it as an attack on poverty and a need for a greater focus on sustainable resource management. The conservation community might hail it as a call for biodiversity conservation and the preservation threatened mountain cultures. For mountain scholars, it might suggest the scarce and uncertain scientific database for mountain environments known in some circles as the "Himalayan dilemma" (Ives and Messerli, 1989). And for government or commercial interests, it may mean promoting tourism, sustainable forestry, regulated mining, or small hydropower interests.

Changing Environments and Roles

Combined with the multiple values, perspectives, and stakeholder interests in the Mountain Forum, the accelerating rate of change in mountain environments must also be considered. Mountains are characterized by high levels of biophysical diversity, general fragility, and an active geomorphology which collectively create a complex, dynamic, and ill-defined set of baseline conditions. When human interference triggers an imbalance, the environmental damage is swift (e.g. landslides, erosion) and often difficult to reverse.

The diversity of cultural responses to change is no less complex. Mountain populations already marginalized and among the poorest groups in the world, are in full collision with rapid global changes in markets, communications, and population growth. The declining status of women, unequal terms of trade, and a diminishing natural resource base are only a few of the impacts of this confrontation (Byers, 1994). Resource management and community social systems which once functioned are now inadequate.

Gerry Neville noted this phenomenon is in many areas where traditional systems have functioned in relative isolation from the modern world:

While traditional organisations based sometimes on tribal customs and values have played very important roles in the past in conserving forest resources, I think there is plenty of evidence that these traditional systems often run into problems when a new operating environment (notably the market economy) intrudes upon them (Neville, 1997).

In order to cope with these ever-changing roles and conditions, new and innovative approaches are needed. One of the approaches which the Mountain Forum advocates is the creation of a new dialog between the field and policy-makers, so that the changing realities of mountain environments are made visible at many levels.

A Kaleidoscope of Methodologies

The Mountain Forum connects its diverse participants through a wide variety of media and methods. Four kinds of linkages are encouraged: through the Regional Node, through the Information Server Node, direct links between participants, and links from participants to outside groups or stakeholders. At the regional level, communication takes place through meetings, workshops, a printed bulletin, radio outreach, email discussion lists, and web pages.

The Information Server Node offers a wide range of internet-based (email and web) services, and also produces a limited number of printed publications, including a bulletin (joint with Regional Nodes), an indexed membership

directory, a bibliography of documents available through the on-line library, and proceedings of the electronic conferences.

Internet-based services include electronic conferences, email discussion lists, auto-reply documents, an on-line library (accessible via email or web), a calendar of events, membership information and survey results, and regional information. All of this information is archived and fully searchable on the Mountain Forum's web site (<http://www.mtnforum.org>).

Information dissemination, beginning with the policy recommendations of Agenda 21, Chapter 13 and its revisions is a core function of the Mountain Forum. It now encompasses a wide range of case studies, best practices, research results, calendar events, and dialog between participants. This information comes from the participants themselves rather than from an institutional center.

Another intriguing process is taking place in tandem with information dissemination - the development of a common consciousness. This is occurring partly through transfer of knowledge, but equally importantly through a unique process of "self-discovery", wherein people hear about mountain issues in other parts of the world, makes a strong association with their own mountain area, and "discovers" a common agenda. One new participant wrote how her students experienced this:

I use the 'general problems of mountain areas' for comparison with the problems of the Sumava Mountains in my lecture. It was surprising, that after writing the "general mountain problems", most of the students thought that I gave them examples from our Sumava Mountains (TMI, 1997b:36).

The beginning of a common understanding of mountain issues also brings a welcome re-creation of those issues. Each new version of "Why Mountains?" offered by a participant expands and enriches understanding of the mountain policy agenda. A core literature now exists and is widely accessible to the mountain community.

The way information is handled departs from the traditional promotion of objective "truths" and places equal importance on creativity, meaning, and synergy. Anecdotes, personal stories, and poetry are disseminated in the same way as case studies and research summaries. The source of information is also important, and significantly more effort is expended by the moderator in gathering information from the grassroots level (where it is hard to obtain) than from well-connected experts. Little time is spent on the analysis of institutional linkages and roles; rather, learning opportunities emerge through new relationships and new ideas.

Early Impacts

The Mountain Forum began its operations in June of 1996. In August 1997, an evaluation survey was sent to the 416 members registered at that time. The response rate was 33%. Additional evaluation data has been collected in conjunction with the electronic conferences, discussions with participants, and the author's own experience in moderating the email discussion lists and interacting with regional nodes.

Innovation

There is an implicit leap of faith in the building of any pluralistic network. The idea that innovation, empowerment, and real change will occur as a result of an experiment in communication is intriguing. It is certainly not a traditional way of meeting development assistance or resource management goals.

True, the mountains are a special case where NGOs are dispersed and fragmented and are little aware of what is going on beyond the watershed, let alone the national frontier. But as someone said with laborious earnestness at Lima, "Communication among people with the same aims banishes the isolation which saps the will to act. It encourages people to share experiences and so quickens the pace of development and increases confidence in action. It transforms a scattered community of interests into a coherent body of purpose" (Stone, 1997)

Conditions for innovation within the Mountain Forum are good, because of the widely disparate worldviews and knowledge spheres which participants bring to the network. Wheatley (1992:113) describes this process:

Innovation is fostered by information gathered from new connections; from insight gained by journeys into other disciplines or places; from active, collegial networks and fluid, open boundaries. Innovation arises from ongoing circles of exchange, where information is not just accumulated or stored, but created. Knowledge is generated anew from connections that weren't there before.

Most (65%) Mountain Forum participants have no prior experience with global mountain issues (TMI, 1997a). They are widely diverse in terms of geography, type of work, field of specialization, and institutional affiliation. What they share is an interest in mountains and a willingness to participate in a network which has little, if any, overlap with their more familiar professional or collegial groups. For example, a forester who happens to work in mountains may join the Mountain Forum, and discover with some surprise the number of like-minded people working on related issues - not from a forester's perspective, but with definite implications for integrated solutions.

The concept and operations of the Mountain Forum are innovative in terms of the relationships between organizational partners and the cooperative undertakings they engender. For individual members, the innovation stems from exposure to new ideas and new contacts. In some cases, this is simply through access to information about "standard" practice or accepted "state-of-the-art". Because part of the Mountain Forum constituency is isolated from mainstream information sources, what passes for commonplace in development circles may be quite a new idea in an isolated mountain setting.

Electronic conferencing has been an important source of innovation within the Mountain Forum. In its first summer of operation, with FAO and the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation as sponsors, the Mountain Forum hosted an electronic conference on the topic "Paying for Mountains: Innovative mechanisms and promising examples for financing conservation and sustainable development". The wide range of promising examples and mechanisms reflected the diversity of the participants, and formed an array of case studies on which to base an economic policy agenda for mountains - balancing the downward flow of resources from mountainous regions, and recognizing the stewardship role that mountain populations play. Identifying and valuing resources at their full environmental and social costs, and creating an enabling policy environment, were critical recommendations of the electronic conference (Preston, 1997).

Elements of the Mountain Forum organizational model have been used by other organizations, as in this example given by a participant (TMI, 1997b:38):

Please see the establishment of a Forest Monitoring Forum on the home page of the World Forest Institute. The Mountain Forum served in several ways as a model and an inspiration for this network (www.vpm.com/wfi).

Shifting the Balance of Power

Facilitating platform processes, or giving a voice to different stakeholders, is an aspect of communication that resonates in the Mountain Forum context. Like many organizations of the rural or urban poor, mountain organizations are often invisible in a policy context. They are frequently not included in negotiations, even when the topic at hand might be the very resources that a mountain community depends upon for survival. Ramirez (1997) highlights this linking of different stakeholders in a process of joint action as a key element in participatory learning and communication. Building a common language, and creating a global mountain community, has brought new actors to the policy stage, while allowing new initiatives to move forward.

A greater degree of policy coherency will ultimately involve changes in the balance of social forces with the emergence of groups or alliances which can challenge the power and influence of traditional élites, constitute new support

groups, and bring pressure to bear on policy makers (Utting, 1993:167, cited in Ramirez, 1997).

Likewise, pluralism is not enough - it must be combined with creating new social capital, and new power relationships:

...a pluralistic approach to policy making (though welcome) should not substitute for measures to address social exclusion and unequal power relations (Hildyard et al., 1997)

A community conservation coordinator describes the impact of such increased visibility on his program in South Africa:

The Mountain Forum has helped me recognize how important a discipline Mountain Conservation is. Here we are regarded as secondary in comparison to the conservation of the more tropical ecosystems which contain some incredible biodiversity. Our understanding of mountain conservation as a science within itself has helped me to focus on my work as being unique and different and as being of use and not something that may only count. As a result, our community conservation programme for the KwaZulu-Natal Drakensberg has been called "partners in mountain conservation" instead of being seen as part of a much larger generic operation that sees the priorities being elsewhere. Thank you for giving us pride and identity. This has helped us tie into what is happening elsewhere in the world in terms of community conservation (e.g. the Nepalese Forest Legislation which is an eye opener for us), mountain management (the management of human waste in the Rockies as we have the same problems) and the Antananarivo Declaration of African Mountain Mountains certainly gave me hope and direction in the programme that I run. (TMI, 1997b:40).

Or, in the words of a community activist in Poland:

I have discovered your (our?) beautiful world of mountain NGOs not so long ago. Here, in Sudelenland, we thought God and people had forgotten us. I was [...] captured by the idea of a Mountain Forum Europe...And then, suddenly, there we were...ready to show our conclusions, facing the government, pressures from Brussels, various foundations and such individuals (TMI, 1997b:39).

Professional Growth and Empowerment

The most obvious and easily measured impact of the Mountain Forum is on the professional growth of its participants, as evidenced by knowledge gained and shared. Table 2 summarizes the evaluation responses related to this impact.

Table 2. Impacts related to professional growth and information sharing (Multiple answers accepted; total responses are greater than 100%; Source: TMI, 1997b)

Has the Mountain Forum had an impact on your own work?

Improved access to mountain-specific information services	56%
Broader knowledge of mountain issues	46%
Exposure to different viewpoints	40%
Specific knowledge of case studies and real-life experiences	40%
Wider network of colleagues - a greater sense of community	35%
Greater participation in conferences, publications, initiatives	19%
All of the above	27%
Nothing	0%
Other	

Have you shared information or ideas from the Mountain Forum with:

Colleagues	79%
Students	35%
Community groups	23%
Other networks	22%
In reports or publications	14%
Other	9%

The sense of community is perhaps particularly important in terms of empowerment. One participant writes:

Generally, the forum's discussions and the sense of 'community' have strengthened my resolve to continue with research in mountain areas, and has helped to soften some of the cynicism that had crept into my work. It has rekindled a desire to engage in more policy and practice oriented activities (TMI, 1997b:33).

Organizational Changes

Bebbington et al. (1997:35), in their conclusions regarding social capital, pluralism, and development, highlight:

The very positive role that networks linking people who work in these different institutional spheres can play in making inter-institutional relationships more productive.

The most obvious impact of the Mountain Forum related to organizational change is the creation of new linkages between mountain organizations, and between people in many other kinds of organizations who happen to work in mountain regions or on mountain issues.

There are also examples of new institutional arrangements, such as the recent shifting of the "Mountain Research and Development" journal (published by the University of California Press for the United Nations University and the International Mountain Society) to within the Mountain Forum chapeau. This will permit a greater dissemination to and integration of this seminal journal with mountain stakeholders throughout the world.

Organizational changes to accommodate the new mountain constituency have also occurred. In early 1996 the European Union did not have a single staff person who was responsible for mountain areas. Organizers of the European Mountain NGO Consultation in Toulouse, France that year were required to visit multiple departments and officers in a frustrating cycle of ambiguity. Finally, a delegate whose responsibility lay in rural development attended the consultation. A few months later, in October 1996, at the European Intergovernmental Consultation on Sustainable Mountain Development, the title of this officer had been amended to include mountain regions, and a clear focal point was created.

Policy Development

Fostering policy acceptance is, of course, a critical role for communication within a network which has advocacy as one of its goals. The primary example of policy acceptance is the adoption of the recommendations of the International NGO Consultation on the Mountain Agenda by the third session of the UN Commission on Sustainable Development in 1995.

Continued policy development has been explored within the Mountain Forum through an electronic conference on "Mountain Policy and Law" (Mountain Forum, 1997a). This conference theme, chosen by the participants themselves, began with assembling and disseminating existing policies, recommendations, and laws pertaining to mountain regions. This task was in itself an interesting exercise in discovering new paradigms, since the mountain laws that exist are largely unknown outside their own local contexts. The conference participants then discussed the impact and linkages of the policies at the global, international, national, and local levels. Community self-regulation was particularly valued by the participants; however, examples of effective policy environments were invariably characterized by cooperation across multiple levels of governance. The conference closed with participants raising the question "Where does macro (e.g. national law) meet micro (e.g. community groups)?" (Mountain Forum, 1997a).

Information System Indicators

Information system indicators were developed by Lawrence (1995, cited in Ramirez, 1997) for a study in the Philippines. Table 3 lists these indicators and how the Mountain Forum might be rated against them.

Table 3. Information System Indicators

Indicator	Mountain Forum Status
Use of indigenous knowledge	Highly valued, more needed
Amount of information	Growing, more needed
Access by users	Growing, but still a challenge
Diversity of sources	High
Relevance	High, but multiple objectives
Democratic control	Internet: high; Traditional: uneven
Complementarity of information sources	More needed
Satisfied demand	Growing, not satisfied
Credibility	
Linkages between information sources	High
Direction of information flow	High, multi-directional

Lessons Learned

The Mountain Forum is a young, hopeful organization -- still learning, experimenting and evolving. Whether or not it will fulfill the promise of its first years, and indeed offer a better link between a diversity of stakeholders, while providing a platform to less powerful participants, depends upon many factors. Some of the enabling factors and challenges to be met are described in the following section.

Enabling Factors

The focus on vision which helped create the Mountain Forum continues to be a motivating force within it, even though several of the key institutional visionaries have been promoted or transferred from their positions of responsibility for Chapter 13 of Agenda 21. The role of mountains in nurturing the human spirit is a central part of this vision, and appears to be felt across a broad spectrum of the participants. This strong link apparently substitutes for personal relationships and social capital in some cases, allowing cooperative action in which mountains, rather than individuals or organizations, take center stage.

This is not to imply that individuals have not been essential to the creation and growth of the Mountain Forum. In fact, individual leaders and visionaries within organizations, particularly in government and the UN agencies have provided much of the impetus, along with the critical funding, to make the Mountain Forum possible. Organizations or even programs with a specific focus on mountains are rare, and therefore individuals have played a comparatively larger role. The vision, enlightened leadership, and willingness of these individuals to risk committing themselves to a new kind of partnership have been the life-blood of the Mountain Forum.

Coupled with, and perhaps intricately linked to, the spiritual connection is a willingness on the part of the participants to break out of existing knowledge spheres. Indeed, the Mountain Forum constituency seems eager to break out of traditional fields of knowledge in order to build a new and integrated set of ideas about mountain issues. This understanding of the need to blend disciplines and values seems to be a particular characteristic of the mountain constituency.

Several factors have combined to allow a critical "letting go" of top-down control in the governance of the Mountain Forum, and a willingness to learn to communicate in a vague and sometimes chaotic environment. An important factor has been mature individual leadership, where people or organizations with relatively more power have stood aside, and allowed relatively less powerful stakeholders to have a strong voice in decision-making. The presence of NGOs has contributed to this process, since many NGOs are accustomed to chaos and experienced in the empowerment of marginal groups.

Communication, Hierarchy and Absent Stakeholders

Many challenges face the Mountain Forum as it strives to bring its hopeful mission into reality. Among these are dealing with duplication of effort, language/translation issues, resisting hierarchy, and the absence of important stakeholders.

Designing a communication system which avoids duplication of effort is particularly challenging for an organization that is as loosely structured as the Mountain Forum. During the November 1997 meeting of the Mountain Forum Council, extensive matrices were drawn up in an attempt to capture the tremendous diversity of communication needs and information flow patterns. This felt need has the potential to push the organization toward a more hierarchical structure, although it may be successfully addressed through closer cooperation as well. In becoming a venue for almost all the information flowing in and out of the global mountain community, it should be noted that the Mountain Forum is also reducing duplication of regional and local efforts in important ways.

In any global organization, language will be an important issue. The Mountain Forum has not yet found a satisfying solution to the language issue. The de facto language for internet communications is English, although the moderator group can correspond in French, German, and Spanish as well (one email discussion list is entirely run in Spanish). The bulletin and other printed publications are published in English only, unless special funds are made available for a specific translation. Regional and sub-regional nodes provide some translation of materials, but the bulk of Mountain Forum communications are in English. This does not begin to address the language/equity issue for mountain NGOs and populations, most of whom have English only as a second or third language, if at all.

The temptation to fall back into the comfort and clarity of hierarchical structures has been, and will probably remain, one of the main challenges facing the Mountain Forum. As the institutional partners grow more accustomed to their relationships and duties, there is a continual pressure to formalize these into more traditional structures. Each institution has its own culture, and some of these cultures are very resistant to the open and egalitarian mandate of the Mountain Forum. As new regional nodes come into being, they will bring their own institutional cultures to the partnership. How the Mountain Forum will look in a few years will depend heavily on the constellation of institutional partners, and how willing they are to learn to work within the original mandates of the Initial Organizing Committee. A balanced representation of North and South, NGO and intergovernmental, men and women will be critical to the Mountain Forum's future.

Several key stakeholders are absent from the Mountain Forum roster. An important group is the mining, timber, and hydropower interests. Their eventual inclusion is a major challenge, both in terms of interesting them in equitable and ecologically sustainable development, and also avoiding the potential for being co-opted by the money and special interest they would bring to the network. Nevertheless, real dialog on a sustainable future for mountain regions must include extractive industries, big business and big government, just as it now includes large development agencies such as the World Bank.

At the other end of the spectrum is another, even more critical, group of absent stakeholders - still-isolated mountain populations, who have neither email nor collegial connections with the Mountain Forum network. Accepting their absence is a hard pill to swallow, and vigorous efforts have been made to connect wherever possible, through grassroots organizations, NGOs, and "connected" mountain inhabitants. This latter group makes up an encouraging 24% of the membership base.

Role of the Internet

It would be impossible to overstate the crucial role that the internet has played in the implementation of the Mountain Forum. While in one sense the internet is the domain of new techno-elite, it has also proved to be a democratizing medium of tremendous power. It is informal and non-hierarchical, and absolutely without regional or national boundaries. Participants are able to communicate through the internet without going through intermediaries of any kind. One participant writes of the impact of the Mountain Forum on his work:

I have begun exchanging ideas and experiences with colleagues working across the national border in the same mountain range, a border that for reason of politics and academic disciplinary reasons is rarely crossed (TMI, 1997b:33).

The Mountain Forum seeks to use the internet in ways that minimize technical requirements and maximize outreach to remote areas. For example, all of the internet services, including the web archives and the on-line library, are available by plain email, without attachments. A great deal of effort is put into the email services, to ensure value added for users who must pay by the byte for their messages. The email services are staffed by an active moderation team, whose objectives are to encourage participation from less experienced users and create a "safe" space on the internet, where communication is free from intimidation, insults, junk mail, or "information pollution". The moderators also respond to information requests, assist in linking participants with like-minded colleagues, and perform searches on mountain topics for people who do not have web access.

The Mountain Forum's web site, which is both a searchable archive and a medium for interacting directly, is accessible to a more elite group of users. Even here, the site has been specifically designed to be accessible to the low-tech user, who has only a text-based browser.

The coordinator of the Caucasian Mountain Network writes the following about the use of the internet in his poorly-connected region:

I would say, the Mountain Forum was a discovery for most of the Caucasian environmental organizations...Most of the information services provided by the Caucasian Mountain network are supported by the Mountain Forum's Information Server Node. The efficiency of this program is very high. The Mountain Forum information service shows that the Internet and information technology is not only a [self-contained] communication mechanism. They are more important as a gateway for grassroots NGO's and local communities to build strong world-wide networks and "give a hand" to each other (TMI, 1997b:39).

Email gateways, where a single computer or email address is the hub for a larger off-line network, are becoming more and more common, especially in the NGO community. They are a vital and growing part of the Mountain Forum's outreach.

The essential role of the internet services of the Mountain Forum may be expressed in the words of a participant:

The Mountain Forum is probably the most visible and tangible means of information exchange on the Internet today. The member list in itself is an impressive compendium of not only accredited individuals but also speaks of dedicated field experience. All of this, combined with a responsive and sensitive moderating team, makes the Mountain Forum what is truly is - an international and discipline cross-cutting, "seat-of-the-pants" intuitive mechanism for decisive action (TMI, 1997b:37)

Sustainability

How sustainable the Mountain Forum proves to be will depend upon its continued effectiveness and impact. While the first year and a half of operation has been rich in impact, the organization is still in an experimental and growing phase. The governance structure, the nature of the implementing organizations, and the participants themselves are evolving and have the potential to bring profound changes, both positive and negative, to the network.

A broadening of the funding base will be absolutely necessary to continue meeting the needs of the growing mountain constituency. A part of this may be achieved through a user fee, particularly in developed countries; however, grant-writing and fund-raising will be an essential component of the next phase of operation.

Conclusion: Explorers and Pilgrims

The Mountain Forum has had an exciting, challenging, and successful first phase. Participants have embraced pluralistic communication, and the implementing organizations have striven to keep pace with the demand.

Perhaps the greatest asset of the Mountain Forum is that it is peopled with explorers and pilgrims. The explorers are willing to take risks, to experiment with open-endedness, and forge bravely into new and unknown territory. The pilgrims are patient, receptive, and mindful of the integration of spirituality with all mountain issues. Both are as interested in celebrating mountains as in solving their problems. This common vision has underlain much of the willingness to learn to communicate in new ways within the Mountain Forum network.

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Notes to readers

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For more information please go to:

Mountain Forum Secretariat
C/o International center for Integrated Mountain Development (ICIMOD)
P.O. Box 3226
Khumaltar
Kathmandu, Nepal
Tel: +977 1 5525310/1
Fax: +977 1 5524509 or 5536747
Website: <http://www.mtnforum.org>
Email: [<info@mtforum.org>](mailto:info@mtforum.org)