

# Letter from the Director General

Dear Friends of ICIMOD,

As this goes to press, we express our horror and sorrow over the powerful earthquake that has devastated countless lives in the western Himalayan region of Pakistan, India, and Afghanistan. ICIMOD shares the grief of our mountain neighbours and kin who suffer and will continue in the next few weeks and months to suffer immeasurable losses from this tremendous natural disaster. Our thoughts and prayers go with them.

This issue is devoted to enhancing livelihood options within the context of Himalayan vulnerability. We recognise, and have separate programmes that seek to address the physical vulnerability of our young and geo-physically active Himalayan region. In addition, we recognise that an integrated strategy for coping with physical hazards must also seek ways to improve livelihoods and generate economic growth through which increased security – physical, economic, and social – can be obtained.

The many poor peoples of the vast Himalayan region – and many living today in remote regions where the earthquake struck – have historically depended on a mix of subsistence agriculture, animal husbandry, and seasonal migrant labour for their livelihoods. These traditional systems are characterised by low productivity, diverse use of available natural resources (largely for home consumption), limited markets, and some aversion for innovation. The potential to generate wealth through commerce in unique mountain resources has largely been untapped by mountain residents and thus is undervalued in local and national economies.

However, an increasing body of evidence demonstrates that appropriate development and use of the unique resources of the mountains do provide viable bases for households to rise above poverty and subsistence. Non-timber forest products such as medicinal plants and herbs, essential oils, fibres and silks, natural dyes and organic products, off-season vegetables, bamboo and bamboo products, bees and bee products, and enterprise-based pollination services can provide the basis for increasing incomes and improving livelihoods. Likewise, mountain tourism, hydroelectricity and other renewable energy sources, and the potential for obtaining reimbursement for environmental services, including carbon sequestration, have demonstrated the capacity to become drivers of local economic growth if structured in ways that empower local communities and poor households. ICIMOD studies have shown that these niche-based mountain products and services hold some of the keys to helping mountain people diversify and enhance their livelihood options while reducing pressure on traditional occupations and the environment. Starting this year, ICIMOD in collaboration with IDRC, CFC, and other donors is embarking on a major regional programme on medicinal plants and other NTFPs.

The Agricultural and Rural Income Diversification (ARID) Programme at ICIMOD focuses on precisely these issues. Working in collaboration with other integrated programmes, ARID seeks to improve the economic conditions of mountain peoples through promotion of high value products and services, and linking them to reliable markets. ICIMOD's programmes in these areas seek to find ways to complement nature-endowed opportunities with human-created ones through the development of enterprise, equitable trade links, and local capacity building. As with all ICIMOD programmes, this process works with partners in the region to share experience and knowledge and identify innovations and emerging good practices and strategies that improve mountain people's livelihood options. Partners, including national governments, non-government organisations, the private sector, and grassroots institutions in our eight member countries, are the *real actors* in translating and upscaling the results obtained – and the means by which we can hope to have an impact approaching the scale of the vast Himalayan region that we serve.

We present in this volume some highlights of ICIMOD and our partners' work on livelihoods with a focus on ARID's initiatives. Some heartening successes and many promising results are, we hope, on their way to having a real impact on mountain poverty.

However, as the recent earthquake has so tragically shown, Himalayan mountain peoples are vulnerable to natural forces that can destroy lives, economies, and infrastructure far quicker than these can be built. The hurdles confronting mountain peoples are formidable indeed. It is our overwhelming desire to find ways of improving mountain peoples' security in the intertwined physical, economic, and social dimensions, that drives us as an organisation. ICIMOD is committed to take up this challenge, to work with member governments and partner institutions to improve the livelihoods of the mountain peoples of the region and the fragile environment that sustains them.

I would like to thank all the partner institutions that have contributed to this volume. Special thanks to Dr. Kamal Banskota, Programme Manager for ARID, who has served as thematic editor for this issue. Thanks also to Nira Gurung for putting the issue together, Punam Pradhan for design and layout, Joyce M. Mendez and A. Beatrice Murray for editing, and all the authors that contributed to this volume. We look forward to your feedback and suggestions on how to serve better the mountain peoples by contributing to securing their livelihoods and future.

Sincerely,  
J. Gabriel Campbell, Ph.D.