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The Rio Earth Summit Set the Stage for the Mountain Agenda

With the inclusion of Chapter 13 – ‘Managing Fragile Ecosystems: Sustainable Mountain Development’ – into Agenda 21 in 1992 at the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED), or ‘Earth Summit’, in Rio de Janeiro, the importance of mountain social-ecological systems was acknowledged for the first time on a global scale. Chapter 13 of Agenda 21 focuses on two programme areas: a) generating and strengthening knowledge about the ecology and sustainable development of mountain ecosystems; and b) promoting integrated watershed development and livelihood opportunities. The Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) of the UN was given the role of Task Manager for Chapter 13 with a mandate to facilitate and report on the implementation of these two programme areas. In 1994, FAO convened a task force including NGOs (non-government organisations), development organisations, and UN agencies to coordinate the implementation of Chapter 13. During the decade following the Earth Summit, many specific initiatives by governments, international institutions, NGOs and scientific organisations emerged from Chapter 13. One important initiative was the establishment of the Mountain Forum in 1995: a global network for information exchange, mutual support, and advocacy towards equitable and ecologically sustainable mountain development and conservation. Yet, over the years, it became more and more apparent that Chapter 13 – although being a good starting point – did not adequately address many key issues related to sustainable mountain development, including water resources; biological diversity; cultural diversity and heritage; adequate infrastructure development for mountain people (access to health services, markets, and so on); appropriate recognition and valuation of services and benefits deriving from mountains; the importance of mountains for people’s livelihoods; and the recreational and spiritual significance of mountains (Sonesson and Messerli 2002).

In 1998, the United Nations General Assembly designated 2002 as the International Year of Mountains (IYM) through a resolution which was supported by 130 States. It also agreed to the request made by the Kyrgyz Republic to host a ‘Bishkek Global Mountain Summit’ in the same year. The International Year of Mountains was an excellent occasion to raise awareness about the importance of mountains to life at a global scale, and to promote action. With the Year, the Mountain Agenda gained new momentum and many new initiatives materialised, including the Adelboden Group out of which the SARD-M (Sustainable Agriculture and Rural Development in Mountains) project emerged, GLOCHAMORE (Global Change in Mountain Regions), and the Mountain Research Initiative (MRI). Also in 2002, the Mountain Partnership was launched at the World Summit on Sustainable Development in Johannesburg to promote and facilitate closer collaboration between governments, civil society, intergovernment organisations, and the private sector toward achieving sustainable mountain development.

Key Achievements and Limitations Following the Rio Earth Summit

The institutions, research and development projects, conferences, workshops, and others which developed from Chapter 13 and the International Year of Mountains effectively raised awareness of the importance of mountain systems, and some of them initiated or supported successful interventions promoting sustainable mountain development. Nevertheless, despite all these vital initiatives and the UN General Assembly regularly restating the importance of mountain areas, mountain systems have never received the expected attention in the international development agenda. Other priorities tended to dominate the sustainable development agenda such as the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) and the Poverty Reduction Strategy Papers (PRSP), which were largely implemented as national schemes, not considering specific eco-regions such as mountains.

Today, with global climate change and the expected impacts on mountain people and ecosystems, as well as on the goods and services they provide to more than half of mankind, mountains are gaining a new importance from



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national, regional, and global perspectives. However, the concrete measures and policy proposals proposed in the frame of United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) still lack a mountain perspective, largely because of substantial knowledge gaps from the scientific point of view and an uncoordinated approach by the countries that are most affected by climate change in their mountains.

What is New Since the Rio Earth Summit?

In Chapter 13, mountain systems across the world were treated uniformly; no distinction was made regarding their socio-cultural and economic roles, which vary significantly from one region to another. In mountains in tropical and subtropical zones – in contrast to most mountains in the developed world – populations are generally growing and mountain systems remain centres of livelihoods for hundreds of millions of people (Nogues-Bravo et al. 2006). Climate change in general, and related changes in precipitation patterns and the frequency of extreme events in particular, are expected to directly affect crop yields and livestock and have immediate repercussions on the livelihoods of mountain people. Hence, climate change places mountain systems in developing countries and their growing socioeconomic vulnerability at the centre of attention. In addition, growing demands for water and hydroenergy and other ecosystem services deriving from mountains have led to recognition of the need for more integrated visions addressing upstream-downstream interdependencies, as well as integrated basin-wide management approaches. In addition, the urgency of adaptation to climate change has redefined the globalising development agenda in terms of calling for eco-region specific development agendas. Finally, mountain systems have suddenly gained global attention because of receding glaciers and growing glacial lakes, which create new vulnerabilities and are, at the same time, the most spectacular indicators of climate change. Creating a more solid knowledge base on the under-researched cryosphere of developing countries will not only serve mountain systems and their people; it will also create highly relevant indicators to assess the efficiency of global greenhouse gas emission reduction measures.



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