



Fighting for higher ground

Occupying the high ground has always been of strategic importance when opposing forces have fought for local or regional supremacy. The rugged, high terrain of mountain areas offers not just a place to seize military advantage. It can also be a place of refuge for opposition movements retreating from lowland areas. As many mountain regions are on the borders between two or more countries, they end up serving as the battlefield for transboundary conflicts. Mountain people are helpless hosts to the combatants. In addition, if opposition forces remain for the long-term, the communities themselves are transformed into insurgent communities.

What can be done? How are we meeting the challenge?

The preceding pages describe some of the main reasons that mountain regions suffer disproportionately from conflict. But underlying all of them is the fact that mountain regions are often the poorest and least developed places in the world, as well as the homelands of indigenous cultures. Social inequality, political marginalization and environmental stress are all problems that poor people commonly face. And as conflicts become more protracted, violence has a greater effect on the economy. Poor people become poorer.

Fortunately, awareness of the need to protect mountain people and their environment has increased over the last decade – since the Rio Earth Summit 1992, through the International Year of Mountains 2002 and beyond. It has also been recognized that mountain challenges cannot be tackled by one organization alone. It requires working side by side – with mountain communities, scientists, development agencies, decision-makers, civil society, the private sector and governments. And it requires coordinated action on many fronts – political, economic, educational, health, environmental. Since the only people who can prevent or resolve conflicts in the long run are the local residents themselves, they must be an integral part of decisions made and actions taken.



MOUNTAINS FOR PEACE

PEACE FOR MOUNTAINS

The Siachen glacier between India and Pakistan is the longest mountain glacier in the world – and the world's highest battlefield. For 20 years, the armed forces of India and Pakistan have been fighting here, and 15 000 people have died. In addition, 1 000 kg of human waste are dropped into crevasses on the Indian side each day. This waste will find its way into the Indus River, on whose waters millions of people depend.

Turning the entire area into a Transboundary Peace Park could help resolve this conflict. The park would enable both parties to withdraw under conditions of honour and dignity; it would save thousands of lives and billions of rupees; and it would stop further degradation of a magnificent mountain area. Transboundary Peace Parks aim to foster cooperation and peace between countries and to conserve ecosystem. The number of Transboundary Protected Areas, more than 169 today, has doubled since 1990.

Fortunately, many successful alliances and initiatives, both large and small, are under way to promote peace and stability in mountain regions. The momentum must continue. By taking concerted action – individually, nationally, regionally and internationally – to promote peace and stability in mountain regions, the number of hungry and undernourished in the world could be dramatically reduced, and natural resources could be sustained for generations to come.

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PEACE ON HIGH

The importance of reducing conflict for mountain development

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THE WORLD'S MOUNTAINS COVER ABOUT ONE-FOURTH OF THE PLANET'S LAND SURFACE AND ARE HOME TO 10 PERCENT OF ITS POPULATION. THEY ARE A SANCTUARY FOR AN EXTRAORDINARY WEB OF PLANT AND ANIMAL LIFE AND A SOURCE OF WATER FOR ALL OF THE WORLD'S MAJOR RIVERS.

Yet, mountain people – the guardians of these valuable mountain resources – are among the world's poorest, hungriest and most marginalized populations. Indeed, many of the more than 800 million chronically undernourished people in the world today live in mountain areas. In some cases, their food insecurity is a consequence of population growth, which often has a harder impact on poverty in mountainous regions because of the fragility of these regions' natural resources. In others, periods of hunger arise as mountain farmers abandon traditional farming practices for methods that are unsustainable on mountain terrain.

One of the greatest causes of poverty and hunger in mountain regions is the chaos created by armed conflict. In 1999, 23 of the 27 major armed conflicts in the world were being fought in mountain regions.⁽¹⁾ Where there is armed conflict, people cannot carry out fundamental life-sustaining tasks, such as planting and harvesting crops. Where mines are laid, agricultural lands must be left barren until expensive mine clearance can be undertaken, typically many years later. Roads, schools and other infrastructure are destroyed, halting economic development. And, of course, the death, injuries and emotional trauma of armed conflict devastate individual lives and national advancement.

⁽¹⁾ A major armed conflict is one that results in the death of at least 1 000 people, whether through conventional warfare, terrorism, guerrilla insurgency or repression of minority peoples.



PEACE ON HIGH

But poverty is one of the driving forces behind conflict. Ethnic and religious issues, social inequality, political marginalization and environmental stress are major causes of conflict – all problems commonly faced by poor people. And as conflict becomes more protracted, violence has a greater effect on the economy. As a result, poor countries become locked in a vicious cycle where poverty causes conflict and conflict creates more poverty. The average conflict tends to increase the number of people living in extreme poverty by 30 percent.



In times of conflict, women in mountain regions carry a heavier burden. As men join the struggle, the women are left as heads of households. Their workload increases as they compensate for the loss of male labour. Stretched beyond capacity – and with limited access to land, credit, education, technology and rural organizations, all of which could help them improve their well-being and that of their families – their productivity often decreases, taking with it any food security that they may have had and any hope for pulling themselves out of poverty.

It is clear, then, that without peace, we cannot reduce poverty. Without peace, we cannot guarantee secure food supplies. Without peace we cannot even consider sustainable mountain development. Why do mountain regions suffer disproportionately from conflict? Let's take a look at some of the major reasons.

Competition for water

Each day, one out of every two people quenches his or her thirst with water that originates from mountains. A billion Chinese, Indians and Bangladeshis, 250 million people in Africa, and the entire population of California, United States, are among the 3 billion people who rely on the continuous flow of fresh, clean water from mountains – for drinking, domestic use, irrigation, hydro-power, industry and transport. It is not surprising that mountains are called “the water towers of the world”.

Most of the large rivers of the world flow through the territory of two or more countries. Competition over the allocation of shared waters is widespread, especially in arid and semi-arid regions such as the Middle East and Central Asia. “Upstream-downstream” relationships are at the root of many conflicts, as both sides seek to assure that they have adequate water in terms of quantity and quality. In 1995, for example, disputes over water triggered 14 international conflicts.



Ethnic diversity and ethnic clashes

“Armed combat in mountain regions – some 105 wars and conflicts between 1945 and 1995 – resulted in 11.1 million casualties, including 7.8 million civilians. While natural disasters are usually well reported, the world community has tended to ignore mountain warfare in all its forms, including the atrocious treatment of mountain minorities. The transformation of mountain minority peoples into stateless refugees must be arrested”.

United Nations University

In extensive mountainous regions, people throughout history have tended to settle in individual valleys that are separated by precipitous ridges; these people have little contact with their neighbours. Moreover, because of their relative inaccessibility, many mountain regions have been long-lasting areas of retreat for indigenous peoples and ethnic minorities, or sites of refuge for communities that were forced to move because of political or economic reasons, or both.

Ethnic diversity *per se* does not trigger conflict or violence. But such diversity can pave the way for conflict if there are social and economic stresses, or if government policy marginalizes ethnic minorities. Unfortunately, many such stresses and policies exist.

Development and its aftermath

Development can inadvertently be a cause of conflict in mountain regions. Many development initiatives – mining and the construction of dams, for example – are undertaken by “outsiders” who exploit the resources for the benefit of those in the lowlands. Often, the local populations are not consulted about the projects; neither are they involved in decision-making when projects are being designed. Mountain people often suffer the consequences – destruction to their homes, air and water quality and soil integrity. A frequent result? Violent conflicts.

It must also be remembered that immediate responses when a conflict has subsided often take the form of food aid. While food aid may be needed for the immediate term, it does not address the issue of long-term sustainability. What's more, it doesn't explore the underlying problems to the conflict – preventing conflict situations in mountain areas is as important as responding to them. How can we help prevent conflicts from taking place or from worsening the plight of mountain communities? By building healthy, self-sufficient and sustainable mountain economies.

A haven for drugs

Virtually all of the world's cocaine and heroin production is concentrated in three relatively small mountain regions: the Golden Triangle of Southeast Asia (northern Thailand, Myanmar, Lao People's Democratic Republic and southwestern China), the Golden Crescent of Southwest Asia (northern Pakistan and Afghanistan) and the White Triangle of the Andes (Bolivia, Colombia and Peru). This is no coincidence – these mountainous areas have three essential ingredients: favourable soils, favourable climate conditions and severe poverty among the peasant farmers.

For international criminal organizations, cocaine and heroin mean big money. For many of the peasant farmers, the drug trade simply means survival. When governments and international organizations attempt to eliminate drug trafficking by curtailing the cultivation of illegal crops, it is often the poor farmers who pay the heaviest price.

TURNING AWAY FROM THE POPPY IN THAILAND

For centuries, Southeast Asia's diverse and independent hill peoples lived well by “eating the forest,” following their ancient agricultural cycle. But rising pressure for land – and the conflict that accompanied it – destroyed the natural equilibrium of the cycle, and the forest began to die. Hard-pressed, hill people in northern Thailand turned to the poppy, and by the late 1960s they were producing 150 tons of opium a year.

In 1969, Thailand's King Bhumibol Adulyadej Maharaja set in motion the Royal Project to move the hill people back toward stability and prosperity without the poppy. Research stations were set up to test hundreds of temperate-climate fruit trees and vegetables for their potential as cash crops. Volunteers from universities and government agencies then introduced the successful ones to villagers in demonstration centres throughout the highlands.

Nearly 300 upland villages have benefitted directly from the project, which is also setting up schools, cooperatives, rice banks and medical services. Apricot trees donated by Japan are growing alongside peaches and plums from North America, pears and persimmons from Taiwan, apples from Israel and kiwi from New Zealand. Opium cultivation has declined by 85 percent.

TROUBLE AT THE BORDER DEMOCRATIC REPUBLIC OF THE CONGO, RWANDA AND UGANDA

Created in 1930, Virunga Park stretches 8 000 square kilometres along the Democratic Republic of the Congo's border with Rwanda and Uganda. At the time, Virunga Park was Africa's only game park, where hunters were forbidden and tourists welcomed. But since 1994, the tourists have been replaced by refugees and militia. One million Rwandans, who have since left, sought refuge in the park, along with hundreds of Congolese traditional warriors and Rwandan Hutu mlitiamen blamed for the genocide in Rwanda. Rangers in the park say the armed men now act under the authority of a Congolese warrior. One of their major acts has been to decimate many of the animal species through poaching: out of more than 7 000 elephants before the war, only about 1 400 remain; the hippo population has dropped from 20 000 to about 1 300. So far, mountain gorillas are the only endemic species to have survived the war, thanks to transborder cooperation between rangers from Rwanda, Uganda and the Democratic Republic of the Congo.

Annette Lanjouw, a primatologist with the International Gorilla Conservation Programme, says that if peace prevailed in the region, the world's last 720 mountain gorillas could generate some US\$20 million annually in tourist revenue for the three countries. Still, it is widely believed that only a better commitment from local authorities and a final settlement of the Democratic Republic of the Congo's war will fully protect this world heritage. And more importantly, it will put an end to this human tragedy, which has already claimed an estimated 3 million lives.

