

Chapter 22

United Nations Mountain Agenda, the Mountain Partnership and Related Regional Mechanisms

By Rosalaura Romeo



United Nations Mountain Agenda, the Mountain Partnership and Related Regional Mechanisms

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Abstract

Mountains cover almost a third of the Earth's land surface and are home to 15 percent of the global population, many of whom are among the poorest in the world. Since the Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro in 1992 and the adoption of Agenda 21's Chapter 13, "Managing Fragile Ecosystems: Sustainable Mountain Development", global action to promote sustainable mountain development has been supported by the United Nations (UN) and national and international stakeholders. The Mountain Partnership is the UN alliance dedicated to sustainable mountain development. It promotes advocacy and knowledge sharing in support of national policies and international cooperation to sustainably manage mountain landscapes and empower mountain people. Regional level initiatives for transboundary cooperation exist for some of the major mountain ranges, such as the Alps, the Andes, the Carpathians and the Himalayas. Accelerated international and national actions to reduce the vulnerabilities of mountain people and to respond to the impacts of climate change in mountains are needed.

Keywords

Mountains; sustainable development; biodiversity; climate change

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1. Why do mountains matter?

Mountains are found on all continents, covering more than a quarter of the earth's land surface (Romeo *et al.*, 2020). Mountains play essential ecological roles for the planet and provide important ecosystem services to billions of people living downstream, such as stabilizing slopes, regulating climate, regulating hydrological cycles, and supporting livelihoods (Baral *et al.*, 2017). Mountains and their peoples are under pressure from climate change, hunger, poverty, and migration. Isolation, marginalization and lack of access to services make mountain peoples – especially those living in rural areas – among the poorest, most malnourished and vulnerable to hunger in the world. Because of their globally recognized ecological, social and cultural importance, and due to the transboundary nature of many ranges, mountains are specifically part of and mentioned in the global sustainable development agenda.

Sustainable mountain development is multifaceted and aims at enhancing the capacity of institutions to promote sustainable growth in mountains, managing mountain landscapes, ensure the provision of ecosystem services, empowering mountain communities, boosting mountain economies, and improving food security and nutrition.

Box 1. Key statistics on mountains and mountain peoples

- Mountains cover about 27 percent of the earth's land area and are home to 1.1 billion people (15 percent of the world's population) (Romeo *et al.*, 2020).
- Ninety percent of mountain people live in developing countries (Romeo *et al.*, 2020).
- Mountains host about half of the world's biodiversity hotspots and 30 percent of all Key Biodiversity Areas, as well as vital genetic resources for locally adapted crops and livestock (Romeo *et al.*, 2021A).
- Mountain ecosystems provide important ecosystem services to billions of people living downstream, such as stabilizing slopes, regulating climate, regulating hydrological cycles, and supporting livelihoods (Baral *et al.*, 2017).
- Mountains are of paramount importance as water towers, both for mountain people and for around 2 billion people living in connected lowland areas (Immerzeel *et al.*, 2020).
- Two-thirds of irrigated agriculture globally depend on runoff contributions from mountains (Adler *et al.*, 2022).
- In 2018, 39 percent of the global mountain area was covered in forests¹.
- In 2019, mountain tourism was estimated to represent between 9% and 16% of total international tourist arrivals (between 195 and 375 million international arrivals) (FAO and WTO, 2023).
- Since 2000, vulnerability to food insecurity has constantly increased in rural mountain areas of developing countries, where a great majority lives below the poverty line and more than 1 in 2 rural people faces food insecurity (±350 million) (Romeo *et al.*, 2020).
- Approximately 516 million rural people are estimated to live in mountain areas affected by past natural hazards (Romeo *et al.*, 2020).

¹ International Year of Sustainable Mountain Development 2022 communication plan
https://www.fao.org/fileadmin/templates/mountain_partnership/doc/Communication_plan_IYM-2022.pdf

- 311 million people – approximately half of the mountain population in the developing countries – live in areas exposed to progressive land degradation, 178 million of whom are considered vulnerable to food (Romeo *et al.*, 2020).
- An estimated 212 million rural people in mountains lived in areas affected by conflicts between 2000 and 2018. Out of those, 128 million people were vulnerable to food insecurity (Romeo *et al.*, 2020).
- 85 million rural mountain people live more than one hour's travel distance from the closest market (Romeo *et al.*, 2020).

2. Milestones in the global mountain agenda

The global mountain agenda dates back to the landmark United Nations Conference on Environment and Development, also known as the “Earth Summit”, which was held in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil in 1992. At the Rio Earth Summit, an entire chapter of the plan of action “Agenda 21” adopted by the Summit, was dedicated to mountains: chapter 13, “Managing Fragile Ecosystems: Sustainable Mountain Development”. Agenda 21 represented the most comprehensive plan of action for governments, major groups and organizations of the United Nations to address the impacts of human activities on the environment developed until then. Chapter 13 included key objectives for sustainable mountain development, such as raising awareness of the importance of mountains at global, regional and local levels, protecting mountain natural resources, protecting the livelihoods of local communities and Indigenous People, and promoting international cooperation for mountains. At regional level, the Alpine Convention, an international treaty to address transboundary cooperation in the Alps, was signed in 1991 and entered into effect in 1995. The Alpine Convention² entails the guiding principles towards a sustainable life in the Alps, now and in the future. The Convention is the legal basis for safeguarding the sensitive Alpine ecosystems, the regional cultural identities, heritage and traditions in the Alps. At the same time, it is a living instrument, which allows the signatories to deal jointly with pressing and cross-cutting issues.

Another milestone was the International Year of Mountains 2002 (IYM 2002). Its main outcome was the launch of the International Partnership for Sustainable Development of Mountain Regions, commonly referred to as the Mountain Partnership. The Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) – which was already the task manager for chapter 13 and the lead United Nations agency to coordinate observance of the IYM 2002 – was designated as the host organization for the Mountain Partnership Secretariat.

In 2004, the United Nations Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD), adopted a Programme of Work on Mountain Biological Diversity³ with the overall purpose to significantly reduce the loss of mountain biodiversity by 2010 at global, regional and national levels. The CBD decision emphasized the importance of mountain biodiversity for livelihoods, and recognized the value of traditional and sustainable land use practices of indigenous and local communities in preserving mountain biodiversity. The programme of work focused on the high concentration of biodiversity hotspots in mountain regions; the cultural diversity of mountain peoples, and particularly the key role of indigenous and local

² <https://www.alpconv.org/en/home/convention/framework-convention/>

³ <https://www.cbd.int/doc/decisions/cop-07/cop-07-dec-27-en.pdf>

communities in the conservation and management of mountain biodiversity; the fragility of mountain ecosystems and their vulnerability to land-use change and climate change (such as the retreat of glaciers and increased areas of desertification); and upland-lowland interactions, and the relevance of upland ecosystems for the management of food, water and soil resources (CBD, 2004).

Largely, as a result of Mountain Partnership members' active collaboration and engagement during the run-up to, and negotiations for the Third International Conference on Sustainable Development (Rio+20), three paragraphs on mountains were included in the outcome document "The Future We Want". In September 2015, the United Nations adopted the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Mountain Development⁴. Three mountain-related targets were included under two of the 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), recognizing the importance of pursuing sustainable mountain development for a more sustainable future:

- Target 6.6: Protect and restore water-related ecosystems, including mountains, forests, wetlands, rivers, aquifers and lakes;
- Target 15.1: Ensure the conservation, restoration and sustainable use of terrestrial and inland freshwater ecosystems and their services, in particular forests, wetlands, mountains and drylands, in line with obligations under international agreements; and
- Target 15.4: Ensure the conservation of mountain ecosystems, including their biodiversity, in order to enhance their capacity to provide benefits that are essential for sustainable development (UN, 2015).

In 2017, members of the Mountain Partnership agreed on a Framework for Action to ensure that sustainable mountain development is integrated into the 2030 Agenda and in the implementation of the Paris Agreement. The Framework for Action calls upon governments and major groups to support concrete actions, put in place long-lasting processes, and establish policies to strengthen the resilience of mountain peoples and environments.

The United Nations General Assembly declared 2022 as the International Year of Sustainable Mountain Development. The resolution⁵ notes that "despite the progress made in promoting the sustainable development of mountain regions and the conservation of mountain ecosystems, including their biodiversity, the prevalence of poverty, food insecurity, social exclusion, environmental degradation and exposure to the risk of disasters is still increasing, particularly in developing countries, and access to safe and affordable drinking water and basic sanitation as well as to sustainable modern energy services continues to be limited". The International Year also marked the twentieth anniversary since the proclamation by the United Nations General Assembly of the IYM 2002 and the establishment of the Mountain Partnership. The main outcome of the IYM 2022 was the declaration of 2023-2027 as Five Years of Action for the Development of Mountain Regions⁶.

3. The Mountain Partnership: A multistakeholder global alliance

The Mountain Partnership is the only United Nations global alliance specifically dedicated to sustainable mountain development. In its over 20 years of existence, the

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<https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/content/documents/21252030%20Agenda%20for%20Sustainable%20Development%20web.pdf>

⁵ <https://undocs.org/A/RES/76/129>

⁶ For more information: <https://www.fao.org/mountain-partnership/five-years-action/en/>

Partnership has evolved so to maintain its relevance in a changing international context and to adapt to its growing membership. It brings together governments and civil society organizations that are dedicated to protecting mountain environments around the world, under a multi-stakeholder governance structure. The Partnership currently has 522 members, including 66 governments, 21 intergovernmental organizations, 423 major group organizations and 12 subnational authorities (member count as of 22 November 2023)..

Box 2. Timeline of the mountain agenda's key milestones

1992: Earth Summit - Chapter 13 of Agenda 21 adopted
1995: Alpine Convention entry into force
2002: International Year of Mountains
2004: CBD Programme of Work on Mountain Biological Diversity adopted
2006: Carpathian Convention entry into force
2012: Rio+20 - The Future We Want adopted
2014: Andean Initiative founded
2015: 2030 Agenda and SDGs adopted
2017: Mountain Partnership Framework for Action launched
2022: International Year of Sustainable Mountain Development
2023-2027: Five Years of Action for the Development of Mountain Regions

The work of the Mountain Partnership is organized along four pillars: advocacy, capacity development, knowledge sharing and communications, and joint action⁷. One of the Mountain Partnership's main advocacy activities is facilitating the annual observance of International Mountain Day globally on 11 December. The Mountain Partnership Secretariat at FAO, the coordinating agency for this United Nations Day, supports Mountain Partnership members and non-members with communication campaigns including the dissemination of key facts and messages, infographics, social media cards, videos and a photo contest. International Mountain Day provides the opportunity to raise awareness about the importance of mountains to life and to highlight various mountain-related issues such as mountains as a source of freshwater, mountain tourism, disaster risk management, food security, mountain cultures, and others.

Another significant advocacy activity led by the Mountain Partnership is the production of the triennial United Nations Secretary-General report on sustainable mountain development. The report describes the status and progress made in promoting sustainable mountain development at the national and international levels. Focusing on various themes, it provides an overall analysis of the challenges and includes recommendations on how to more effectively achieve sustainable development in mountain regions. The report forms the basis of a resolution⁸ that is adopted every three years by the United Nations General Assembly. The report has been compiled periodically since 2001 by the Mountain Partnership Secretariat and FAO in collaboration with governments, other United Nations agencies and non-governmental organizations.

⁷ For more information, please refer to the Mountain Partnership website: <https://www.fao.org/mountain-partnership/our-work/en/>

⁸ For more information, please refer to the Mountain Partnership website: <https://www.fao.org/mountain-partnership/our-work/advocacy/un-secretary-generals-report-on-mountains/en/>

4. The international policy landscape on sustainable mountain development

Mountain policy is generally realized through non-legally binding instruments. At the international level, there are many soft-law instruments but few legally binding instruments. Most legal instruments related to mountains are thus national legislation, many having a sectorial approach.

The Alpine Convention⁹ is a treaty under international law between Austria, France, Germany, Italy, Liechtenstein, Monaco, Slovenia, Switzerland and the European Union. It strives for an integrated sustainable development of the Alps, a very densely populated mountain region with more than 13 million inhabitants.

Another regional instrument is the Carpathian Convention¹⁰ having seven parties, including the Czechia, Hungary, Poland, Romania, Serbia, Slovakia and Ukraine. The Convention provides the framework for cooperation and multisectoral policy coordination, a platform for joint strategies for sustainable development, and a forum for dialogue between all stakeholders involved.

The idea of an Andean Initiative¹¹ was officially launched in Argentina in September 2007 with a declaration and an Andean Action Plan¹². Through the Mountain Partnership Secretariat, FAO supported the process through a dedicated project. In 2014, Argentina, Bolivia (Plurinational State of), Chile, Colombia, Ecuador, Peru and Venezuela (Bolivarian Republic of) formalized this regional mechanism with the aim to support the sustainable development of the Andes, strengthening of national institutions, and well-being of mountain peoples.

A study by the FAO Legal Office in 2002 found that only a few countries had specific mountain legislation: Spain (Ley de Montes of 1957, abrogated replaced by Law 43/2003¹³); Italy (Law of 03/12/1971)¹⁴; France (Law of 17/01/1985)¹⁵; Greece (Law 1892/1990)¹⁶; Georgia (Constitution of 1995 + Law of 08/06/1999¹⁷); Switzerland (Law of 21/03/1997)¹⁸; Ukraine (Law of 1995); and Russian Federation – Republic of Ossetia-Alania (Law of 30/12/1998)¹⁹ (FAO, 2002). The situation has changed little in the last 20 years, owing also to the challenges represented by legislative integration to adopt a law concerning a specific territory, as this has to build – among other things – on legal and institutional clarity, funding, new authorities, and interaction with other sectorial laws.

5. Conclusion

Sustainable mountain development means sustainably managing mountain landscapes and empowering mountain communities for better environment and better lives.

⁹ For more information, please refer to the Alpine Convention website: <https://www.alpconv.org/en/home/>

¹⁰ For more information, please refer to the Carpathian Convention website: <http://www.carpathianconvention.org/>

¹¹ For more information, please refer to the Andean Initiative website: <https://iam-andes.org/?lang=en>

¹² For more information, read the Tucuman Declaration: <https://iam-andes.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/10/2007-Declaracion-de-Tucuman.pdf>, Timeline and info here: <https://iam-andes.org/infografia/>

¹³ <https://www.global-regulation.com/translation/spain/1449749/law-43-2003%252c-of-21-november%252c-montes.html>

¹⁴ <https://www.normattiva.it/uri-res/N2Ls?urn:nir:stato:legge:1971-12-03;1102!vig=>

¹⁵ <https://www.legifrance.gouv.fr/loda/id/JORFTEXT000000317293/>

¹⁶ <https://www.e-nomothesia.gr/kat-dasos-thera/n-1892-1990.html>

¹⁷ <https://matsne.gov.ge/ka/document/view/19210?publication=16>

¹⁸ <https://www.fao.org/3/Y3549E/y3549e14.htm>

¹⁹ <https://base.garant.ru/31902883/>

In the 30 years since the adoption of the mountain chapter of Agenda 21 at the Earth Summit in 1992, the role of mountains for sustainable development has received constant global attention. A multitude of governments, researchers, academics, and non-governmental organizations contribute to keeping the importance of mountain ecosystems and the needs of mountain communities in the spotlight of the international development agenda. Many of these stakeholders convene under the umbrella of the Mountain Partnership to strengthen international cooperation and strengthen their voices and efforts.

The declaration of the Five Years of Action for the Development of Mountain Regions 2023-2027 provides an opportunity to mobilize political commitment and investments for mountains. The quinquennium will enhance the international community's awareness of issues affecting mountain countries and give new impetus to efforts aimed at addressing their challenges. On the path to achieving the goals of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, reducing the vulnerability of mountain people should be a priority. Policies are needed to address the root causes of their vulnerability, including inequitable gender dynamics and marginalization. The high fragility of mountains to the impacts of climate change cannot be underestimated. Accelerated global and national level actions and transformational approaches are needed to reduce greenhouse gas emissions and support adaptation in mountains.

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About the Author(s)



Rosalaura Romeo started working on mountain issues more than 21 years ago when FAO was tasked with promoting the first International Year of Mountains in 2002. A unit was created in FAO, and she was asked to transfer there because of her interest in this topic. Later that year, the Mountain Partnership was created, and what started as a small unit has now become the Mountain Partnership Secretariat, where Rosalaura has been working since then. She M.Sc. in Agriculture from the University of Tuscia and her expertise spans from agricultural and forestry research to international advocacy and donor relations. She

is the Coordinator of the Mountain Partnership Secretariat hosted at FAO's Headquarters. Rosalaura devoted a large part of her career to the sustainable development of mountain regions and had a crucial role in 2002 in the creation of the Mountain Partnership, the only Multi-stakeholder UN Alliance dedicated to improving the lives of mountain peoples and protecting mountain ecosystems, with over 400 members around the world. The Mountain Partnership is in charge for the celebrations of the International Year of Sustainable Mountain Development 2022.