

## Innovation Pathways to Sustainability in Mountains

**Deadlines:** Submit notice of intent by 31 May (or later) and full paper by **1 October 2024**

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*With this focus issue, MRD aims to contribute to a better understanding of the nature, processes, and impacts of innovation in mountain areas around the world. We consider innovation to be a multidimensional and context-specific concept that can refer to an ambition, practice, discourse, or outcome. In particular, we are looking for contributions that critically examine how socioeconomic, institutional, technological, scientific, and other types of innovation are of specific relevance to promoting or undermining sustainable development in mountains.*

Innovation has become an authoritative term in the science, policy, and practice of societal transformation toward a more sustainable world, including in mountain regions. Indeed, the mainstream understanding of innovation continues to be closely associated with the promise of technological solutions, unfettered economic growth, and reduced environmental impact. While new ways of thinking and doing are definitely needed to respond to the environmental and socioeconomic crises that many mountain regions are facing, a more nuanced examination of the concept of innovation is needed. In the STEPS Centre publication *Innovation, Sustainability, Development: A New Manifesto*, for example, the authors argue that meeting interlinked global challenges requires fostering “more *diverse* and far more fairly *distributed* forms of – and *directions* for – innovation, towards greater social justice” (2010: 2; emphasis in original).

Mountain regions lend themselves particularly well to generating new knowledge about innovation. On the one hand, innovation in the sense of continuous adaptation to unstable conditions often characterized by marginalization, vulnerability, and material scarcity has always been both a virtue and a necessity; of late, this has been exacerbated by mountain regions’ disproportionate exposure to the consequences of global climate change. On the other hand, these very same conditions, real or imagined, have regularly served to legitimize the promotion of innovation from outside, by state and nonstate actors alike. This has led to an apparently paradoxical outcome: where the capacity to embrace exogenous forms of innovation has become a dominant criterion of eligibility for economic or other support, greater socioeconomic and territorial disparity has frequently been the result.

In response, many scientists, practitioners, and policymakers have turned their attention to new understandings and forms of innovation, at times, with an interest in mountain regions. One approach has involved a critique of theories that prioritize the diffusion of innovation, including their tendency to disregard the interrelationship between the technical components and the social environment; to separately analyze innovators and users; and to neglect the local dynamics of adoption. Scholarship in this tradition includes different strands more or less closely associated with actor–network theory as proposed, among others, by Michel Callon, Madeleine Akrich, and Bruno Latour (eg Latour 2007).

Another approach has taken issue with the assumption that innovation always amounts to the introduction of something new (an object, function, service, or practice) and that the success of said innovation should be measured by the number of adopters. Scholars such as Frédéric Goulet and Dominique Vinck (2012) have explored the notion of “innovation by retreat,” whether by removal, renunciation, or evacuation; in mountain regions or coastal areas, work on strategic, managed retreat is one example. Others, notably Navi Radjou and coauthors (2012), have coined the term “frugal innovation,” which entails cost reduction, concentration on core functionalities, and improved performance, taking inspiration from the Hindi concept of *Jugaad*. These approaches share an awareness of the negative environmental consequences of existing production and economic models. According to the recently published *Handbook on Frugal Innovation* (Leliveld et al 2023), specific reference is also made to the economic downturn in rich countries, rising public expenditure for grand challenges, lack of access to public goods and services in low-income countries, and growing interest in innovation under resource constraints. In mountain regions, one example is renewed attention by state and nonstate actors, as well as scholars, to the innovative potential of autochthonous agricultural practices.

From the perspective of frugal innovation for sustainable mountain development, social innovation assumes special importance. Social innovation implies an explicit consideration of the contribution of innovation to the wellbeing of people and the planet; the role of, and approaches to (transformative) learning and capacity building; the conditions (“tipping points”) that facilitate transformation through innovation; and the proximate and wider institutional environment that enables social innovation. In other words, analysis of innovation should consider how specific forms of innovation in mountain regions can support sustainable development, and how sustainable development can facilitate directed, distributed, and diverse, yet specific innovation needs in mountain regions.

With this focus issue, MRD aims to contribute to a better understanding of the nature, processes, and impacts of innovation in mountain areas around the world. It aims to bring together work that critically examines how socioeconomic, institutional, technological, scientific, and other types of innovation are of specific relevance to promoting or undermining sustainable mountain development. We expect to compile a global collection of both basic and applied research that provides examples of novel conceptual and methodological approaches to the topic. We invite contributions, including comparative studies, that explore and address innovation in, for, and with different mountain areas of the world.

Specifically, we invite contributions from scholars and development specialists for MRD’s 3 peer-reviewed sections:

**MountainDevelopment** (transformation knowledge): Papers should present insights into and lessons learned from systematic assessments of innovative processes or from action-oriented and transdisciplinary research. They should focus on how initiatives have helped to maximize the benefits and reduce the negative impacts of innovation. For example, papers may assess the positive and negative impacts of different processes of innovation in such sectors as agriculture, tourism, or energy; lessons learned from social innovation approaches, such as visioning processes, social innovation labs, living labs, or gamification; or policies and processes of the diffusion of frugal innovation, with a special focus on the links between an object of innovation and its social environment.

**MountainResearch** (systems knowledge): Papers in this section should present empirical research, or meta-analyses focusing on innovation as an ambition, practice, discourse, or outcome. For example, papers may examine methods for measuring and evaluating innovation impacts; compare innovation discourses applied in regional development policies in different regions; or explore actor constellations in innovation contexts.

**MountainAgenda** (target knowledge): Papers should propose agendas and priorities for future research, policies, or interventions, with a focus on directing innovation toward sustainable mountain development and making it inclusive and diverse. The agendas must be based on a sound state of the art that results either from a rigorous and in-depth literature review or from a systematic stakeholder process in the respective field.

### Submission details

- Email a short **notice of intent** (including a working title, 2–3 sentences on the content, and the journal section to which you intend to submit the paper) to [mrd-journal.cde@unibe.ch](mailto:mrd-journal.cde@unibe.ch) by 31 May 2024 (notices received later may still be accepted).
- **Submit your full paper by 1 October 2024** using MRD’s online submission platform.
- The issue is scheduled for completion in **August 2025**; articles will be published on a rolling basis, as soon as they are ready.
- Before submitting, please read our guidelines for authors at <https://www.mrd-journal.org/for-authors/>.
- For more information on the journal, see <https://www.mrd-journal.org/>.
- As a not-for-profit open access journal, MRD charges authors a publication fee to offset part of its production costs: <https://www.mrd-journal.org/about/publication-fee-policy/>.

Jörg Balsiger, João Carlos Azevedo, Sara Nowreen, Dietrich Schmidt-Vogt, and Anne Zimmermann, guest editors, in collaboration with MRD’s Editorial Office, April 2024

### REFERENCES

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**Radjou N, Prabhu J, Ahuja S.** 2012. *Jugaad Innovation: Think Frugal, Be Flexible, Generate Breakthrough Growth*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.

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