

# Global Sustainable Mountain Development: Contribution of Kyrgyzstan in Solving of Problems in Mountainous Countries

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## Abstract

The term ‘global sustainable mountain development’ refers to the collective efforts aimed at promoting sustainability and addressing the specific challenges faced by mountainous regions worldwide. Kyrgyzstan, as a mountainous country initiated a declaration of 2002 as the International Year of Mountains in 1998 and made significant contributions towards solving problems in such regions through various initiatives and collaborations. Mountains are vital hotspots that encompass a wide range of valuable resources, both natural and cultural, hosting unique and diverse ecosystems and livelihoods. Therefore, it is crucial to address the specific challenges faced by mountainous countries and promote sustainable development within the Global Mountain Agenda.

**Key words:** Bishkek Mountain Platform, Global Mountain Agenda, International Year of Mountains, Kyrgyzstan, mountain ecosystems and livelihoods, sustainable mountain development

## 1. Introduction

Before beginning, the authors would like to note that for several of years, Prof. Asylbek Aidaraliev worked in the Russian Far East as Director of the Institute for Biological Problems of the North, Far Eastern Branch of the USSR Academy of Sciences. The ‘*perestroika*’ process initiated by President Gorbachev during that time made it possible to establish contacts with the University of Alaska and several other American scientific institutions. Together with the American Association for Advancement of Science, his institute organized conference entitled: “Bering Bridge: Present and Future”. Prof. Asylbek Aidaraliev took part in reorganizing the Magadan Pedagogical Institute into Magadan University with participation of specialists from the University of Alaska and Hokkaido University, and he came up with the idea of creating the International University of Kyrgyzstan, which would operate according to the Western standards. In 1993, he returned to Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan’s capital, and organized the International University of Kyrgyzstan, co-founded by San Francisco State University. He suggested to his colleagues from the American Association for Advancement of Science to

hold a conference similar to the one held in the Russian Far East, so they decided to organize a conference in 1996 named: “High Mountain Research: Changes and Perspectives in 21st Century”. The conference’s resolution included a paragraph on the need to organize an International Year of Mountains. This idea was supported by the President of the Kyrgyz Republic, Askar Akaev, who wrote a letter addressed to the United Nations Secretary-General. Then Prof. Aidaraliev took this letter and traveled to the New York where meetings and discussions were held with many delegations, and working together with representatives from Kyrgyzstan at the United Nations, they prepared a resolution for the United Nations General Assembly. As a result, in 1998, by Resolution A/RES/53/24, the United Nations General Assembly proclaimed 2002 the International Year of Mountains.

## 2. The Global Mountain Agenda

‘The Global Mountain Agenda’ refers to a set of priorities and actions aimed at addressing the specific challenges and opportunities related to sustainable mountain development. Moreover, it encompasses a range

of issues and goals that are vital for the well-being of mountain ecosystems, local communities, sustainable livelihoods and poverty reduction.

In 1992 at the World Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro, special attention was given to the mountain environment. The United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED) adopted Chapter 13 of Agenda 21, titled “Managing Fragile Ecosystems: Sustainable Mountain Development.” This agenda supported Kyrgyzstan’s initiative in 1998 to declare 2002 the International Year of Mountains. The United Nations organized a working group to celebrate the Year of Mountains, of which Prof. Aidaraliev became a member from Kyrgyzstan.

In 2002, the Mountain Partnership was launched during the World Summit on Sustainable Development in Johannesburg. It was supported by the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) of the United Nations and evolved into a voluntary alliance of governments, intergovernmental organizations and major stakeholders committed to promoting sustainable mountain development. The partnership aims to improve the livelihoods of mountain communities and protect mountain environments through collaborative efforts.

As the initiator, Kyrgyzstan began actively participating in and hosting various events at the international, regional, and national levels. In 1998, following adoption of the United Nations General Assembly Resolution, the National Center for Mountain Regions Development of the Kyrgyz Republic was established by presidential decree. The center serves as a coordinating state body for preparing and promoting projects and programs at the global, regional, and national levels.

### 2.1 The Importance of Mountains

At the United Nations, we justified our initiatives by pointing out that mountains occupy one fifth of the earth’s land and about 10% of world’s population is living in mountainous areas. In fact, according to the latest data, nowadays around 22% of the world’s population lives in mountainous areas (Anarbaev, 2022). Most of world’s population depends on mountain resources for water, agriculture, forestry, mining and biodiversity. Mountain resources are not only of national and regional-transboundary importance. Mountains supply more than half of humanity with fresh water, mountains are the ‘water towers’ of the world. Mountainous regions account for a significant portion of the world’s timber, mineral resources and pastures. As reported by the FAO (2016) mountains are home to the largest number of diverse ethnic groups and ancient cultural traditions, a repository of rich ecological information and habitat for a variety of mountain-adapted species. The fact that mountains have a rich variety of vast natural landscapes and cultures has made them very attractive for tourism. Mountain

resources have not just for national and regional importance, but also global importance (Aidaraliev, 2020).

### 2.2. The Mountainous Countries

Being a global intergovernmental organization, the United Nations has 193 member states, among which are many countries referred to as mountainous countries. According to the data from the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation (2001), there are 53 such countries. With a few exceptions, these countries are generally less developed in terms of socio-economic indicators compared to lowland areas. Mountainous countries face socio-economic challenges associated with geographic constraint, limited agricultural potential, lack of basic services such as healthcare, education, clean water and sanitation, vulnerability to natural disasters, and limited economic diversification (Anarbaev, 2018). It is true that while many mountainous regions face socio-economic challenges, there are exceptions where favorable geographical factors contribute to relatively comfortable living and economic conditions. Proximity to warm oceans and seas, access to water transport, and location in subtropical or tropical zones can indeed provide certain advantages to mountainous countries in terms of climate, natural resources, and economic opportunities. These factors can contribute to better socio-economic indicators compared to other mountainous regions. It is important to consider the unique characteristics and diversity within mountainous countries and regions when discussing their living conditions and socio-economic development.

### 3. The International Year of Mountains

To implement the International Year of Mountains, the Council of Patrons of Mountain Countries was created, led by the President of the Kyrgyz Republic, and including heads of governments and leaders of donor and international organizations. The initiative aimed at promoting and addressing the specific challenges faced by mountainous regions globally. The involvement of the President of the Kyrgyz Republic showed the importance placed on the issue of sustainable mountain development and highlighted the recognition of Kyrgyzstan’s leadership in this field.

#### 3.1 The Bishkek Global Mountain Summit

The United Nations General Assembly, in its Resolutions A/RES/53/24 and A/RES/55/189, declared 2002 as the International Year of Mountains. This designation aimed to raise awareness and promote sustainable mountain development worldwide.

Chapter 13 of the 21st Century Agenda, which refers to the Johannesburg Plan of Implementation adopted during the World Summit on Sustainable Development in

2002, highlights the importance of sustainable mountain development and recognizes the need to address the specific challenges faced by mountain regions.

The Bishkek Global Mountain Summit, held from October 28 to November 1, 2002, in Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan, served as the final event of the International Year of Mountains as designated by the United Nations.

The summit brought together international leaders, experts and stakeholders to discuss and address the challenges and opportunities related to sustainable mountain development. The participation of Kofi Annan, who was then Secretary-General of the United Nations, highlights the significance and global attention given to the issues faced by mountain regions.

The Bishkek Mountain Platform is the outcome document of the Bishkek Global Mountain Summit and became a framework for cooperation established during the International Year of Mountains. The platform served as a means to foster international collaboration, exchange knowledge and promote sustainable mountain development.

As a result of these efforts, the United Nations, through its Resolution A/RES/57/245, designated December 11 as International Mountain Day in 2003. This annual observance aims to raise awareness about the importance of mountains and the need for sustainable development in mountainous regions. It provides an opportunity to promote actions and initiatives that address the specific challenges faced by mountains and highlight their crucial role in providing ecosystem services, supporting biodiversity and sustaining the livelihoods of millions of people worldwide.

Following the Bishkek Global Mountain Summit, Kyrgyzstan adopted several fundamental documents on sustainable mountain development:

- The Law of the Kyrgyz Republic “On Mountain Territories” was adopted.
- With the support of the ADB project “Regional Cooperation for Sustainable Mountain Development in Central Asia,” the Central Asian Mountain Information Network (CAMIN) was established in Bishkek. It is based at the International Institute of Mountains at the International University of Kyrgyzstan. CAMIN covers Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan and the Xinjiang Uygur Autonomous Region of China.
- Kyrgyzstan prepared the “National Strategy and Action Plan for Sustainable Development of Mountain Regions of the Kyrgyz Republic” and adopted it for implementation by the Government in 2022. Similar documents were also prepared for the other Central Asian republics.
- The “Regional Strategy and Action Plan for Sustainable Development of Mountain Areas” was prepared.
- The Central Asian Mountain Charter was prepared, and signed by the leadership of Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan and Tajikistan.

### 3.2 Further Outcomes of the Summit

It should be emphasized that the Bishkek Global Mountain Summit served as a basis for the international community and its financial institutions to provide extensive financial, technical and other assistance to poor and developing mountainous countries. Subsequently, the United Nations adopted several important documents that encompassed fundamental political and socio-economic decisions. These documents aimed to address the specific challenges faced by mountainous regions and promote sustainable development in those areas.

- Resolution of the United Nations General Assembly A/RES/58/203 in 2004 on “External Debt Crisis and Development.”
- Resolution of the United Nations General Assembly A/RES/59/238 in 2005 on “Rendering Assistance to Poor Mountain Countries to Overcome Obstacles in the Socio-economic and Ecological Areas.”
- Resolution of the United Nations General Assembly A/RES/62/196 in 2008 on “Sustainable Mountain Development.”

## 4. Initiatives for Mountainous Countries

### 4.1 Organization of a Group of Developing Mountain States

Some poor mountainous countries have been included for special programs such as “Heavily Indebted Poor Countries” (HIPC) and “Small Island Developing States” (SIDS). However, up to now, the mountainous countries have not formed an active group to defend and promote their interests in sustainable development and environmental protection. At one time, in 2005, the “Mountain Initiative” project, developed by the International Institute of Mountains, the Institute for External Debt Problems of the International University of Kyrgyzstan, and the National Center for Mountain Regions Development of the Kyrgyz Republic, provided an opportunity to address the challenges faced by mountainous regions. This project aimed to promote sustainable development and find solutions to issues related to mountainous areas. In addition, in 2005, in collaboration with the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) in the Kyrgyz Republic, a document titled “Exchange of External Debt for Sustainable Development” was prepared. This document outlined Kyrgyzstan’s approaches and initiatives, defining its overall strategy and action plan for sustainable development. Despite the help and assistance provided by developed states and international financial organizations, developing mountainous countries and regions continue to face conflicts, terrorism, and drug trafficking. These issues are often attributed to the poverty experienced by the population residing in mountainous regions. Moreover, many developing mountainous states carry a heavy burden of external debt, which continues to grow despite timely interest and principal payments. One potential

solution addressing the challenges of sustainable mountain development is through debt swaps and external debt write-offs. The International University of Kyrgyzstan, in collaboration with the National Center for the Development of Mountainous Regions of the Kyrgyz Republic, has undertaken the development of various projects aimed at debt write-off and debt swapping. One of these projects is the “Organization of a Group of Developing Mountain States with the Aim of Debt Write-off and Debt Exchange.” This initiative seeks to bring together developing mountainous states to explore possibilities for reducing their external debt burden through debt forgiveness and debt restructuring mechanisms.

Indeed, the organization of specific groups within the United Nations to address the challenges faced by different categories of countries has proven effective in promoting collaboration and finding solutions. The establishment of groups such as “Small Island Developing States,” “Landlocked Developing Countries,” and “Least Developed Countries” has provided a platform for these countries to voice their unique concerns and seek collective solutions to their specific challenges.

Similarly, the organization of a dedicated group for mountain states could facilitate and promote the resolution of problems specific to mountainous regions. This group could serve as a platform for sharing experiences, exchanging best practices and mobilizing support to address issues related to sustainable mountain development, poverty alleviation, environmental protection and resilience against natural disasters. By fostering cooperation and providing a unified voice, such a group could help advocate for the needs and priorities of mountain states on the international stage.

In 2011, the International Mountain Conference took place in Lucerne, Switzerland, and featured various roundtable discussions. During the conference, there was strong support for the proposal to establish a group of mountain countries at the United Nations to protect their interests. The Kyrgyz Republic also highlighted the issue of external debt faced by mountain states and put forth a proposal to exchange this debt for sustainable mountain development.

Importantly, this initiative gained further recognition at the United Nations Global Summit on Sustainable Development “Rio+20” in 2012. The proposal to create a group of mountain states was incorporated into the summit’s documents, and representatives from several mountain countries expressed their approval for the idea of establishing such a group. These developments reflect the growing recognition and support for addressing the unique challenges and promoting the sustainable development of mountainous regions on the global arena.

## 4.2 External Debt and Sustainable Development

The external debt of Kyrgyzstan poses a significant challenge to the country’s development. Introducing a mechanism for exchanging external debt for sustainable development presents new opportunities for resolving various issues, including ecological concerns. This approach has been successfully employed by many developing countries that have entered into agreements with creditor nations. It has proven effective in reducing poverty, decreasing debt dependence and attracting foreign investment.

In line with this, Kyrgyzstan has developed a project titled “Swap of External Debt of Kyrgyzstan for Assistance to Afghanistan.” The aim of this project is to redirect a portion of Kyrgyzstan’s multilateral and bilateral debt towards supporting Afghanistan. By doing so, Kyrgyzstan can alleviate the burden of external debt and redirect resources towards the country’s economic development. This can be achieved by supplying food products and construction materials, as well as engaging Kyrgyz workers in the construction of roads, hospitals and schools, and providing vocational training. This project not only supports Afghanistan but also benefits Kyrgyzstan by stimulating economic growth and creating opportunities for its citizens as well.

Additionally, there is a project for the construction of a hydroelectric power plant that incorporates a water supply component aimed at restructuring the multilateral external debt. A similar project was successfully implemented by South Africa and Lesotho with the support of the World Bank.

In 2019, Kyrgyzstan took the initiative to create a group called the “Friends of Mountain Countries” at the United Nations. The main objective of this group is to facilitate problem-solving and promote an agenda for sustainable mountain development. By bringing together like-minded countries, the group aims to address the specific challenges faced by mountainous regions and advocate for their interests at a global scale. This initiative reflects the commitment of Kyrgyzstan and other mountain countries to collaborating and finding effective solutions for sustainable development in mountainous areas.

## 5. Contribution of Kyrgyzstan to the Current Global Mountain Agenda

On the initiative of President Sadyr Zhaparov of the Kyrgyz Republic, the United Nations declared the year 2022 as the International Year of Sustainable Mountain Development. This declaration was made during the Plenary meeting of the 76th session of the United Nations General Assembly on December 16, 2021.

The Kyrgyz Republic had the opportunity to present a draft resolution before its consideration. The declaration was launched to commemorate the 20th anniversary of the

First Bishkek Global Mountain Summit that took place in 2002.

The resolution calls upon Member States, the United Nations system, other international organizations and stakeholders including civil society, the private sector and academia, to appropriately celebrate this international year. The aim is to raise awareness about the importance of sustainable mountain development and current challenges, as well as the conservation and sustainable use of mountain ecosystems.

By designating 2022 as the International Year of Sustainable Mountain Development, the United Nations seeks to focus global attention on the unique challenges and opportunities faced by mountainous regions. It provides a platform for promoting dialogue, exchanging best practices and encouraging actions that contribute to the sustainable development of mountains and the well-being of mountain communities.

Kyrgyzstan has been actively promoting the interests of landlocked mountain states on the international stage for the past three decades. As a testament to the country's dedication, three resolutions on sustainable development of mountain regions have been adopted at its initiative.

The first resolution, titled "Nature Knows No Borders," was adopted at the 75th session of the United Nations General Assembly on April 16, 2021. The second resolution, titled "Strengthening Monitoring and Research of Mountain Glaciers," was adopted at the 41st session of the UNESCO General Conference on November 23, 2021.

These resolutions and initiatives demonstrate Kyrgyzstan's commitment to addressing the unique challenges faced by mountainous regions and its dedication to promoting sustainable development and the well-being of mountain communities.

Based on the various global, regional and national events that have taken place, Kyrgyzstan has proposed a new United Nations Resolution for adoption. This resolution aims to support the declaration of 2023–2027 as the "Five Years of Action for the Development of Mountain Regions." Additionally, a global mountain summit called "Bishkek+25" is planned to be convened in 2027.

The opening ceremony of the International Year of Mountains took place on April 28, 2022, at the platform of the Mountain Partnership. The ceremony was attended by the President of the Kyrgyz Republic, heads of mountain states and heads of international organizations. It served as a significant gathering to mark the beginning of the International Year and demonstrate the collective commitment towards sustainable mountain development.

The International Year of Sustainable Mountain Development and the five-year program for the sustainable development of mountainous regions present a unique opportunity for mountainous states to draw global attention to the challenges they face. They also call for the

formulation of integrated state policies in the areas of socio-economic and cultural development, nature conservation and the sustainable use of resources.

It is crucial to shift our focus towards the issues faced by mountainous regions and change the prevailing perception of their challenges. There is a need to create favorable conditions for the development and implementation of a comprehensive policy for the sustainable development of mountainous territories. This policy should encompass economic partnerships, social well-being and recognition of the global environmental significance of mountains.

Kyrgyzstan strongly relies on the attention, support and assistance of the international community, the United Nations and global financial institutions in addressing the ecosystem challenges faced by mountainous countries and regions, particularly those without access to the sea. Therefore, we believe it is vital and time-sensitive to establish a dedicated global fund within the United Nations. This fund would provide support to mountainous countries and regions in implementing targeted programs aimed at achieving sustainable development and facilitating climate change mitigation and adaptation.

As part of the Five-year Program on Sustainable Development of Mountain Regions and in preparation for the Bishkek+25 Global Summit, there are several key initiatives:

- Reorganizing the activities of the Council of Patrons of Mountain Countries: The Council of Patrons will play a crucial role in advocating for the interests of mountainous regions and providing guidance on sustainable development strategies.
- Holding global and regional intergovernmental meetings: These meetings will serve as platforms for policymakers to make important political decisions regarding the sustainable development of mountainous regions. The involvement of governments from around the world will ensure comprehensive and collaborative efforts.
- Promoting mountain agendas, research topics and information exchange: At the global, regional, and national levels, we will actively promote the importance of mountain topics and facilitate the collection and exchange of information. This will foster greater awareness, knowledge sharing, and collaboration among stakeholders.
- Close cooperation with Japan: We are eager to collaborate closely with colleagues from Japan to develop projects and conduct research on the sustainable development of mountainous regions in both Kyrgyzstan and Japan. This partnership will facilitate the sharing of expertise, best practices and innovative solutions.

## 6. Conclusion

In conclusion, it bears to highlighting that managing and sustainably utilizing the resources in mountainous areas is crucial for the well-being of both local communities and the global environment. It is essential to take into account the environmental impact of resource extraction and find ways to minimize negative effects, while also promoting conservation and preservation of fragile mountain ecosystems. Additionally, considering the social and economic aspects is vital to ensuring that local communities benefit from their resources in a fair and equitable manner, fostering sustainable livelihoods and promoting social well-being. By striking a balance and involving all stakeholders, including local communities, governments and organizations, we can create a sustainable approach that protects mountain ecosystems while harnessing their resources for the benefit of present and future generations.

The Global Mountain Agenda will continue to play a critical role in addressing the unique challenges faced by mountainous countries and regions worldwide and promoting sustainable development in these areas. It provides a framework for coordinated action, knowledge exchange and policy development, enabling us to tackle the complex issues of mountainous regions more effectively.

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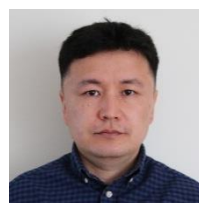
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Asylbek Aidaraliev holds a Doctorate in Medical Sciences and the title of professor. He is an academician at the National Academy of Sciences of the Kyrgyz Republic. Additionally, he serves as advisor to the chairman of the Cabinet of Ministers and head of administration of the President of the Kyrgyz Republic, with the title of Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary Ambassador of the Kyrgyz Republic. As founder of the International University of Kyrgystan, he currently serves as chairman of that university's board of trustees. Over the years, he has dedicated his efforts to promoting the Mountain Agenda, both nationally and globally. He played a key role in organizing the Bishkek Global Mountain Summit in 2002 and facilitated the adoption of several UN resolutions on the Mountain Agenda. Notably, he has served as advisor and special representative of the President of the Kyrgyz Republic on sustainable development of mountain regions. In addition to his diplomatic and administrative roles, he has authored several monographs and publications.

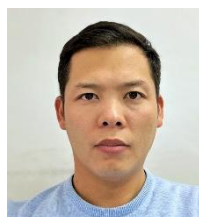
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Maksatbek Anarbaev holds a Doctorate in Natural Sciences from the Free University of Berlin and the title of professor at the International University of Kyrgystan. For many years, he worked at the National Center for Mountain Regions Development of the Kyrgyz Republic, where he has made significant contributions to the development of the Strategy and Action Plan for Sustainable Land Management in the High Pamirs and Pamir-Altai. Currently, he is involved in research projects focusing on the sustainable use of natural resources, local livelihoods, pastoralism and wildlife conservation issues. Additionally, he serves as a national expert on the Sustainable Mountain Development Program within the Global Biodiversity Framework Early Action Support (GBF-EAS) project of the GEF, UNEP and UNDP in Kyrgystan.

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