

CONFERENCE “WOMEN OF THE MOUNTAINS”

Session: Leadership

Mountain sisters, gaining local legitimacy through international partnerships

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International rise of mountain issues, transnational relations and women

The intended outcome of the international conference *Women of the mountains* is “to raise awareness and mobilize support from institutions within the U.S. mountain states and global mountain entities to assist in the sustainable development of the mountain communities of the world, particularly as it applies to women and children”¹. It refers to solidarity between “mountain” regions/communities, which is not an isolated conception. International alliances of mountain regions/stakeholders have increased recently. Collaborations of the Parties of the *Alpine*² *Convention* with other mountain regions (the Carpathians, the Caucasus and in Central Asia) are an illustration of this trend, just as the creation of mountain stakeholders’ platforms such as the *Mountain Forum* (1996) and the *Mountain Partnership* (2002) or group like the *World Mountain Population Association* (2002). These exchanges are clearly embedded in the process of the international recognition of mountains as a global issue³, illustrated at its best by the inscription of a specific chapter devoted to mountains in *Agenda 21* (1992), the action-plan of the *United Nations Conference on Environment and Development* (UNCED), and by the proclamation of an *International Year of Mountains* (2002).

Women have had their place in the mountain political agenda. In the “mountain chapter” of *Agenda 21* (Chapter 13), entitled “Managing fragile ecosystems: sustainable mountain development”, it is recommended to “undertake the above activities, taking into account the need for full participation of women, including indigenous people and local communities, in development” (Ch.13.16.h). “The need for greater empowerment, equity and equality of mountain women has been expressed as an important concern throughout the period of UNCED and Chapter 13 follow-up; it will receive even greater attention” (Sène and Mc Guire, 1997, p.452).

The *Mountain Forum Discussion List - Women* (1998) and the global conference *Celebrating Mountain Women* (2002) show also that women are stakeholders who intend to play a role in this process of international rise of mountain issues. The *Thimphu Declaration*, issued from the last mentioned conference, illustrates this willingness of transnational collaboration. In it, the international community is called upon to “build networks of solidarity and endorse the support of the Global Mountain Women’s Partnership”. This claim is based on the acknowledgment that “without effective policies, networks, partnerships and alliances at the local, national, regional and international levels, mountain women’s economic, social and political marginalization will

¹ www.womenofthemountains.org, visited 02.10.2007.

² European Alps.

³ For further reading on mountains as a global issue the absolute reference book is MESSERLI Bruno and IVES Jack (eds) (1997), *Mountains of the World: a Global Priority*, Parthenon, New York-London.

continue to hamper their development and the development of their communities”. Thus, the ninth recommendation expressed in the *Thimphu Declaration* is to “promote communication among mountain women and communities while preventing the erosion of linguistic diversity”.

Based on the observation of the mentioned above international rise of mountain issues and the following initiatives of collaboration between mountain stakeholders, the *Department of Geography of the University of Geneva* (Switzerland) has carried two research projects about international partnerships and networks established between mountain communities⁴. The goal was to address the forms and motivations of these international cooperations. The partnerships have not been studied with a gender perspective, but a specific subproject is currently focusing on “Mountain Women’s Groups, Organizations and Networks”⁵. Having collaborated to these two research projects, in the context of this conference calling upon collaborations among mountain regions and bringing together mountain women from around the world, I propose here some reflections about international partnerships between mountain communities in general and giving a more specific perspective on leadership and on women.

Political dimension of international partnerships

The motivations and benefits of these international exchanges between mountain communities are multiple: economic, social, cultural and political. These aspects are not antinomic. On the contrary, they can reinforce each other. Thus, by considering the work carried by the *Aga Khan Rural Support Program* in Northern Areas of Pakistan and Chitral, one can observe the impact of economic uplift by earning income as a form of empowerment (Gloekler and Seeley, 2003, p.5 and p.33). The *Thimphu Declaration*, to which it has been already referred, also points out a similar view: “promote economic and technological opportunities to empower mountain women”. Despite this assertion, in the context of this presentation, the focus will be put on the political dimension of these relations: how the legitimacy of the implicated stakeholders is reinforced through their participation in international/transnational partnerships and networks.

The interaction with the “other” is at the core of most partnerships. Rarely apprehended as a goal but rather perceived as an outcome or a side-effect, the partnership appears to develop endogenous energies or in other words to increase social capital at the local level. In the context of the *International Year of Mountains*, a Swiss municipality, facing a rapid urbanization and immigration, established a twinning with an Italian one. By engaging the community in an international relationship and organizing cultural events around it, the local authorities aimed to develop contacts between the new inhabitants of the municipality and the ancient ones.

Going towards the “outside” appears to be a strong mean to reaffirm one’s positioning, culturally and politically. In 2002, a partnership has been established between two mountain regions: Obersimmental in Switzerland and Kotschkor in Kyrgyzstan. For the Swiss partner, international

⁴ The first research project entitled “Swiss mountain communities in a global network: local/global consequences of the uprising of the international rise of mountain issues” was supported by the *Swiss National Science Foundation*, the second entitled “Mountain people in networks: genesis, aims and functioning of mountain people’s networks in the World since 1990” by the *Boninchi Foundation*.

⁵ The results should be presented at the *Second Global Mountain Summit* to be held in October 2007 in Bishkek (to be confirmed).

relations are seen as a way to reaffirm the “alpine culture”. As illustrates the declaration of the partnership, the political dimension is also central: “Both mountain regions have to make themselves heard and remind the values of the mountains”. More generally, it has an impact on the meaning of the place. In the case of a Swiss mountain region having known a golden industrial age and now facing great economic difficulties, its engagement in a partnership and organizing cultural events around it is a way to reaffirm the place as a lively place, a life space.

Inspired by the example of her sister organization *Alliance in the Alps* (1997), the *Alliance of Central Asian Mountain Communities* (2003) has been created “to assist the sustainable development of Central Asian mountain regions and thereby contribute to improve the living standards of their inhabitants”⁶. It has appeared that the organization, which is a network of “territorial public self-governance bodies”, has gained its legitimacy from its international relations and thus reflects the paradox, pointed out by the political scientist Olivier Roy, that “the NGOs so-called local exist in fact only by their relation with the transnational” (Roy, 2002, p.178). The local/regional/national institutions in place are well aware that the “territorial public self-governance bodies” members of the Alliance, due to their form and objective, have access to resources and have relations with donors that they cannot themselves reach. Therefore, they rather see them as a complementarity than a challenge to their authority⁷. Nevertheless, in her study on post-Soviet grassroots women’s associations, Alexandra Hrycak underlines the danger that transnational partnerships represent in terms of privileging these type of relations rather than encouraging domestic coalitions and in forgetting the pre-existent organizations for facilitating the creation of new ones (Hrycak, 2002, p.72).

Self-esteem and leadership

No form of leadership is conceivable, if the person implicated has not any positive appraisal of its own “value”, of its contribution to society. The reflections about the effects of an international partnership on the affirmation of a local place are also valid for the people of the place, the people implicated in the partnership.

Getting back to the specific subject of this conference, the *Mountain Partnership* has underlined the central point of self-esteem: “Many women in mountain regions lack self-confidence and feel less important than men. Factors that influence the self-esteem of mountain women include culture, education, interaction with others outside the community and the ability to earn an income, among others. Even in Tibet, where women are commonly described as free spirited and strong willed, women have a lower self-image of themselves than do men”⁸.

One can identify various origins of this self-low opinion. As usual, these are changing from one area to the other, but there are some trends. In any rural society, the holding of the land and/or livestock is central the status of the people. In most cases, the owners are men. Despite an

⁶ Minutes of the Association.

⁷ For further reading about the *Alliance of Central Asian Mountain Communities*, see NIKONOVA Valeria, RUDAZ Gilles and DEBARBIEUX Bernard (2007), “Mountain communities in Central Asia: Networks and new forms of governance”, *Mountain Research Development*, n°1, p.24-27.

⁸ www.mountainpartnership.org/issues/gender.html, visited 02.10 2007.

essential economic stakeholder of the community, that many studies have underlined, women are often absent of the decision making institutions (Crettaz, 1989, p.58). The shift to a cash-based economy reinforces the power of the one who brings cash to the community. New “modern” activities paid cash, for instance the work in road or dam construction, mainly imply men. The consequence is that dependence of women on their men increases (Ives, 1997, p.72). These activities also imply the outmigration of men, to a further extent than it was in traditional societies. Many have already underlined the increase of workload this outmigration represents for women (Ives, 1997, p.79). The women are confined to the maintenance of the traditional activities to be continued to be carried, even with the absence of men occupied by their new tasks. Modernity operates a distinction between the productive activities, which are the one of men, and the non productive, which are the one of women (Kelkar and Tshering, 2002, p.6). To quote an activist implicated in a partnership, women appear to be the “losers” with modernity. The traditional activities face an economic devaluation and then a symbolic one⁹.

Setting oneself in another context, one can enter a phase of valorization. On the initiative of *Farm Women's Network* (1996), an NGO promoting exchanges between peasant women from Switzerland and from the South, a partnership has been established between Swiss peasant women and Ladakhi ones. In both regions, the status of the women is considered good and both are facing great tensions between tradition and modernity. Modernity greatly affects the peasant communities' economic situation; the agricultural work and especially the manual work are devalorized. The women implicated in the project documented their daily life by photographing it. Then, they visit each other and exposed their lives and learn from the other. They exchanged knowledge about their agricultural techniques and about topics such as conciliating peasant work with other activities. But, as pointed out the Swiss initiator of the project, one of the main impact of the project has been that “these women have acquired a better feeling of their own value” (Roselli, 2004). After their visit to Switzerland, the Ladakhi women started to cultivate strawberries, using greenhouse and transforming it in jams to sell to the tourists-trekkers in the region.

The partnership Obersimmental-Kotschkor we have already mentioned, despite sealing an official partnership between the two regions, has been initially a partnership between a Swiss organization and two Kyrgyz NGOs. The Swiss one is a society for rangeland management (*Obersimmental Alpverein*) and the Kyrgyz ones are an organization promoting tourism in the traditional summer pastures “jailoos” (*Shepherd's life*) and a women's NGO active in the production and selling of traditional felt rugs “shyrdags” (*Altyn Kol*, which means “Golden Hand”). This last mentioned organization started as a project of the Swiss development NGO *Helvetas* to help women willing to sell their rugs. The main weakness was identified as lack of “marketing” and *Helvetas* helped the holding of exhibits of “shyrdags” in the capital (Bishkek). A formal organization soon appeared necessary. 200 women were present at the official creation of the association. In the context of the International Year of Mountains, *Altyn Kol*, as a main partner in the partnership Obersimmental-Kotschkor, held an exhibit of felts rugs in the Swiss

⁹ One should mention that it is not always the case. At the end of 19th and in the beginning of the 20th century, in the context of Switzerland engaged in rapid urbanization and industrialization, the alpine peasant communities entered a phase of symbolic valorization. As these communities were changing through modernity, they were paradoxically valorized for what they used to be. Valorized symbolically as the cultural guardians, they nevertheless face an economic devaluation. Discourses and art paintings of this period show that the women are considered to be a key player in guarding the traditional culture in a changing world.

sister region, where it encountered much success. *Altyn Kol* expressed its willingness to realise this experience again. The “deal” has been that *Altyn Kol* should cover its own costs, notably of travelling to Switzerland. Another exhibition-sale was organized in 2004. It met with great success again and the Kyrgyz partners were able to cover their costs and do some benefits.

Conclusion

Despite this optimistic discourse about the benefits of international partnerships, it would not be fair to conclude without considering the potential negative impacts. Good intentions do not necessarily lead to good actions. As pointed the geographer and mountain expert Jack Ives, some development projects reinforce gender inequality notably by addressing productive technology towards men and domestic technology towards women (Ives, 1997, p.80). Also, despite its central objective whatever it is, one should be aware of the socio-political and cultural context in which the partnership take place and consider the impacts it will have on the communities implicated. The prudence showed by *Aga Khan Rural Support Program* and its willingness to advance by small sure steps rather than to pretend to change a whole society to its fundaments, even if it has been criticized, is certainly a good example (Gloekler and Seeley, 2003, p.5). The worst enemy of partnerships is time; partnerships between communities tend to have short lives. The difficulty of communication is also a central problem. Women appeared to be disadvantaged on this point, having less interaction with the “outside world”, they have less knowledge of languages of communication. Many gender scholars assert that women’s organizations appear to be less hierarchical than the standard ones. They note “that despite their nonhierarchical nature, many feminist organizations have strong and sometimes charismatic leaders” and consider the positive and negative aspects of it (Moghadam, 2005, p.98). This point was evocated in a similar way by an interviewed woman implicated in an organization and which argued that the “main danger” for women’s politics is to devote to role of spokeswoman to one woman, supposedly representing all the others and identified as “the woman”. It has also been warned that “women’s organizations are joined only by elite women – that is, the wives of elite men” (Ives, 1997, p.80).

Most partnerships between communities from “developed” countries with ones from countries “in development” appear to be characterized by a dissymmetry in their relation. But the discourse about mountains challenges the notion of development. The mountain people from developed countries might be considered or often do consider themselves as the “underdeveloped” of the nation. We saw that international partnerships have been a way to reinforce the political status of group (partnership Obersimmental-Kotschkor) and the self-esteem of people - women in this case (partnership Willisau-Ladakh). Despite the initial dissymmetry, what has clearly appeared is that the benefits are both sides. This is partly due to the fact that the endogenous socio-political effects of partnership have as much impact as the content of the relation.

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