

# RESEARCH PAPER

**Moving The Mountain Agenda**  
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Participants in the Lima meeting, February 1995.

The Mountain Institute organised a very bold meeting at Lima, Peru, from the 21 to 27 February, 1995. Over a hundred mountain enthusiasts from across the world congregated at the foot of the historic Andes and deliberated on the future of the world's mountains.

The conference had two primary objectives. First, it sought to produce a document which could carry forward the mountain agenda to the next meeting of the Commission on Sustainable Development (CSD), scheduled to be held, in mid April, in New York. It also intended to set up a network or alliance of NGOs and individuals committed to conserving the world's mountains.

The meeting started off on a somewhat disturbing note when, only a few minutes after the official beginning, the proceedings were taken over so to speak by a group of facilitators (who soon came to be known as "facilitator generals"). Perhaps the size of the gathering had made the organisers think that self regulation or management of the proceedings was not possible and a group of professional facilitators were required to make the meeting run smoothly. Unfortunately, this really did not happen and very soon there was a strong undercurrent, almost universally expressed, against imposed facilitation. Finally, the facilitators were requested to withdraw from the proceedings.

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- # One participant described the facilitators as crevasses en route to the top of the mountain.
  - # Feelings against facilitators ran so high, and they became the butt of so many jokes, that one participant refused to distribute her cards or tell anybody her professional designation in her own country. You guessed it, she was a facilitator back home!
  - # The Lima conference gave birth to a new school of jokes: the facilitator jokes - which promises to endure.
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But whereas this was irritation at the superficial level, unfortunately more fundamental differences started surfacing among the delegates. Though this was primarily a gathering of NGO representatives, some of the splits that began to emerge were

reminiscent of global gatherings of national governments. There was a broad divide between the perceptions of those representing Southern NGOs and those from the North. There were, of course, national and individual exceptions. As usual, many of the Scandinavians and East European delegates were much closer in their perceptions to delegates from the South. Even from other countries, there were individuals whose heart clearly lay with the Southern point of view. On the other hand, there were representatives from some countries of the South who for ideological or personal reasons sidled along with the North.

Historically such a divide has usually had an inevitable outcome, with the North bullying others and getting their own way and the South feeling vindicated because they made the longest and most fiery speeches.

Strong sentiments, strongly expressed, that mountain agendas must be built from the bottom-up, from villages to nations, and from nations to regions and to the world, were summarily dismissed by the organisers. Even some delegates from the South opposed such a move. It was argued that national and regional meetings have already taken place and that this was the global meeting. However, when the representative from ICIMOD, Kathmandu, pointed out that the Asian regional meeting, for example, which was hosted by them was actually a meeting of government representatives and that the NGOs point of view was not represented there, her intervention was brushed aside. Also, the very legitimate demand that if this was the end of the process and that national and regional meetings have already taken place, why aren't the recommendations of those meetings being made available to the participants so that they can ensure that global recommendations are in consonance with national and regional ones, also fell on deaf ears.

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In one working group there were six participants representing five countries. When mountain issues began to be analysed it emerged that among these five countries there were three distinct types of mountain issues. In Nepal, India and Peru the mountain dwellers were usually poor and engaged in traditional professions. In Romania, though engaged in traditional professions (sheep rearing), the mountain people were extremely rich with their own helicopters. In Norway, the mountain people were involved in non-traditional professions (related to tourism) and were also very rich.

Thereby the diversity of the mountains.

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Finally, the meeting, based on the general and somewhat inappropriate resource papers produced by a "few experts" brought out a set of such general recommendations for the global mountain agenda that amazingly not one of the over 40 points attracted any significant dissent or debate. The language was so general that it could accommodate all shades of thought, however diverse, without anyone having to confront the realisation that what they were supporting through a particular recommendation was quite different, perhaps even contradictory, to what the person sitting next to them thought it meant.

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In one of the working groups a British delegate complained loudly that for once in his lifetime he would like to attend a conference where the delegates from the South-Asian sub-continent did not dominate the conversation. He was "Put in his Place" by a South-Asian delegate who reminded him that it was the British who spent nearly 200 years forcing the South Asians to speak English. Now just because they can speak it better than the Brits, they are being asked to keep quiet.

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It is clear that the recommendations that emerged from Lima contained very little that was new. They also captured little of the rich experience of the delegates, essentially because such experience was local while the recommendations were global. This is especially a pity because in the various working groups the rich experience of the participants had spilled out and had resulted in fascinating and innovative case studies which were lost in the irrational process of synthesising recommendations into bullet points. Perhaps the final indictment was when one of the participants, who had attended an earlier governmental regional meeting on the mountains, got up and said that the recommendations from this meeting sounded almost identical to the ones that had emerged from the government meeting.

But having said all this, one cannot disregard the various other things that happened at Lima. Though a forum for the mountains (in preference to a network or an alliance) was set up, strong, informal, bonding also took place between the various participants attending the meeting. Addresses and fax numbers were eagerly exchanged and already one has seen a feverish exchange of a goodwill messages and more serious information.

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There was uneasiness among many of the delegates at setting up a "net-work" or "alliance". Whereas the latter seemed too military, the former seemed to reduce everybody to the status of a computer. However, the clinching argument against "networks" was provided by an Indian villager who (as recounted in one of the working groups) wanted to opt out of an existing network. When asked why, he replied that his experience in a "network" was that while he did all the "work" some one else "netted" the benefits.

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The exceptional group of people who gathered together at Lima, even with all the constraints, could not but help move the mountain agenda forward. If not with the formal document, atleast in their own hearts and minds, and in the hearts and minds of each other, a new resolve was born. Though most of the official resource papers were disappointing, some of the presentations were outstanding and the one on the sacred mountains especially breath taking. Despite the superficial and not so superficial irritants, the Lima Conference represented a unique meeting of distinguished mountain addicts who were, at the end of the day, committed to focus their formidable energies at moving the mountain agenda.

