

# Mountain Farming Is Family Farming

A contribution from mountain areas to the  
International Year of Family Farming 2014



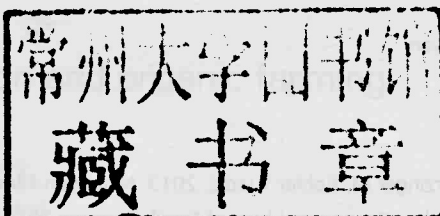
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## 3 Learning and cooperation

## 4 Sustainable intensification



2013

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Cover photo: Hmong ethnic hilltribe families harvesting rice on a terraced rice field in the northern mountainous province of Yen Bai, Viet Nam (Hoang Dinh Nam, AFP/Getty Images)

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# Foreword



Mountain farming is largely family farming – which for centuries has contributed to sustainable development. Thanks to its small-scale character, diversification of crops, integration of forests and husbandry activities, and low carbon footprint, mountain agriculture has evolved over the centuries in an often harsh and difficult environment. The lifestyles and beliefs of mountain communities have inspired them to seek sustenance from the land but also to conserve the natural resource base and ecosystem services vital to downstream communities both rural and urban.

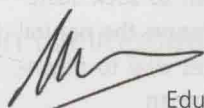
However, recent trends in global development have significantly reduced the resilience of mountain ecosystems. Increasing population, climate change, deforestation, desertification, market integration as well as changes in human values and aspirations are all taking a heavy toll on mountains and mountain development. Yet, in a world increasingly aware of “green” quality and organic products, mountain agriculture can provide high-value and high-quality products that cater to increasing market demand and generate income for local communities.

This growing attention to family farming presents an opportunity for mountain farmers to receive greater support and specific policy interventions. Family farming encompasses all the activities within the realms of agriculture, forestry, fisheries, pastoralism and aquaculture that are predominantly reliant on family labour. The General Assembly of the United Nations proclaimed 2014 as the International Year of Family Farming to recognize and support the contribution of family and small-holder farms to food security, poverty eradication and achieving the Millennium Development Goals.

To tap the potential of mountain agriculture fully, mountain communities would benefit from targeted support for strengthening the value chain – from planning and producing to processing and marketing. An enabling policy environment that encompasses tailored investments, business development and financial services is necessary to improve mountain farmers’ access to resources and enhance their capacities to generate income. Support to mountain farming and the creation of new, diversified employment, training and educational opportunities should be embedded in all (sub)national mountain development policies. Unless the livelihoods of mountain communities improve, local people will continue to migrate to lowlands, cities or other countries. The loss of traditional landowners could leave mountain areas to those who will not have the same knowledge or commitment to use the land in a sustainable way, meaning increasing risk for key ecosystem services such as water and soil management, and biodiversity conservation, which could have add-on risks that would not only affect the mountain people but also the populations in the plains and cities.

This publication intends to raise awareness of the importance of mountain family farming in sustainable development worldwide and encourage investment in this sector. To mark the International Year of Family Farming 2014, the Food and Agriculture Organization of the UN, the Mountain Partnership Secretariat, the Austrian Development Cooperation, the International Centre for Integrated Mountain Development, the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation, the Centre

for Development and Environment of the University of Bern and the Centre for Development Research of the University of Natural Resources and Life Sciences, Vienna have jointly issued this publication. Mountain Farming Is Family Farming is published at a time when the Post-2015 development agenda is being discussed. It is our aspiration that issues related to sustainable mountain development are adequately reflected in the UN Sustainable Development Goals and the Post-2015 development agenda. The following chapters, with concrete case studies, showcase the sustainable development of mountain communities and environments, a cause to which all of the co-publisher organizations are committed.



Eduardo Rojas-Briales

Assistant Director-General  
Forestry Department – FAO

Foreword

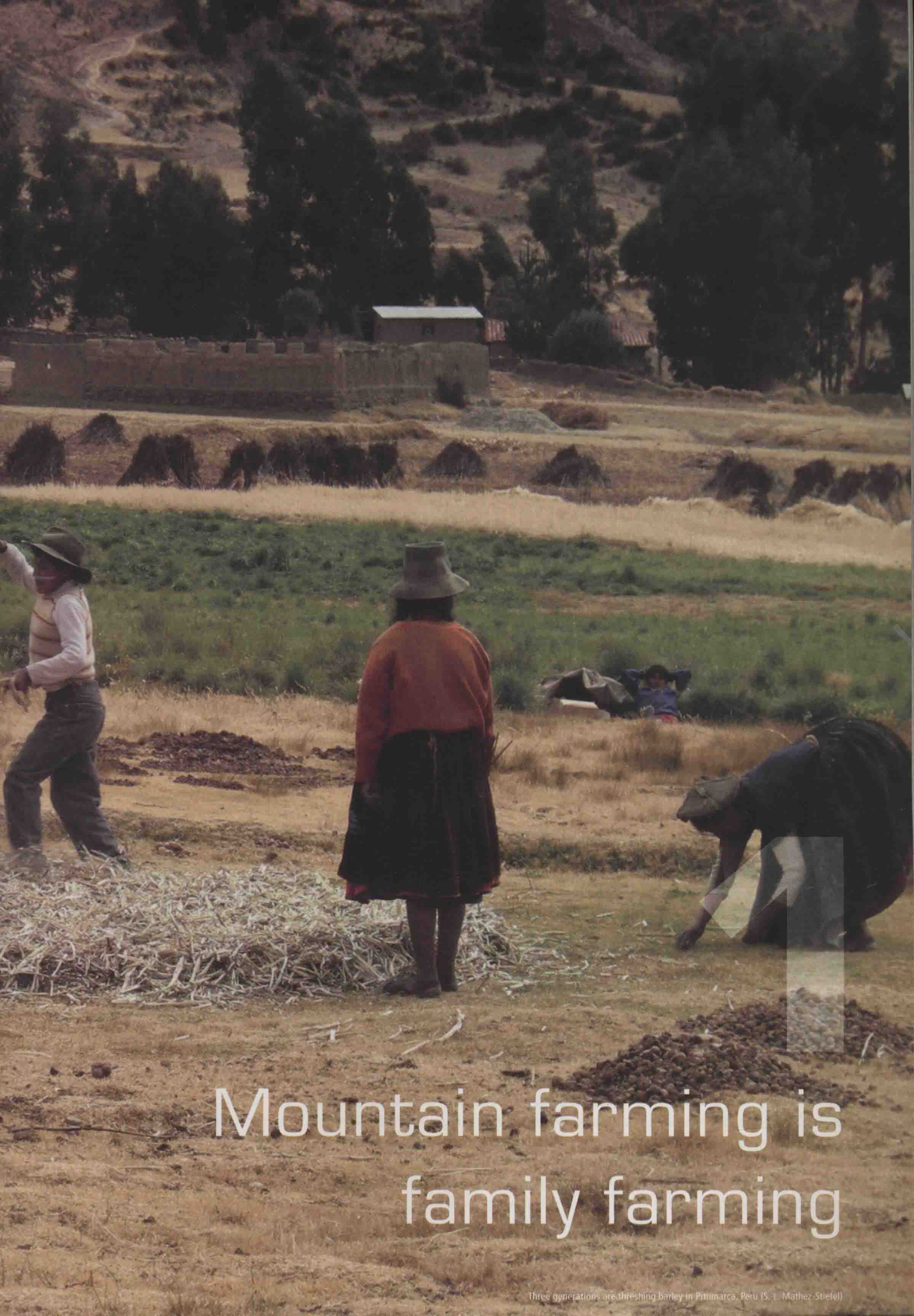












# Mountain farming is family farming

Three generations are threshing barley in Pitumarca, Peru (S. L. Mathez-Stiefel)





Thomas Kohler and Rosalaura Romeo

## Mountain farming is family farming

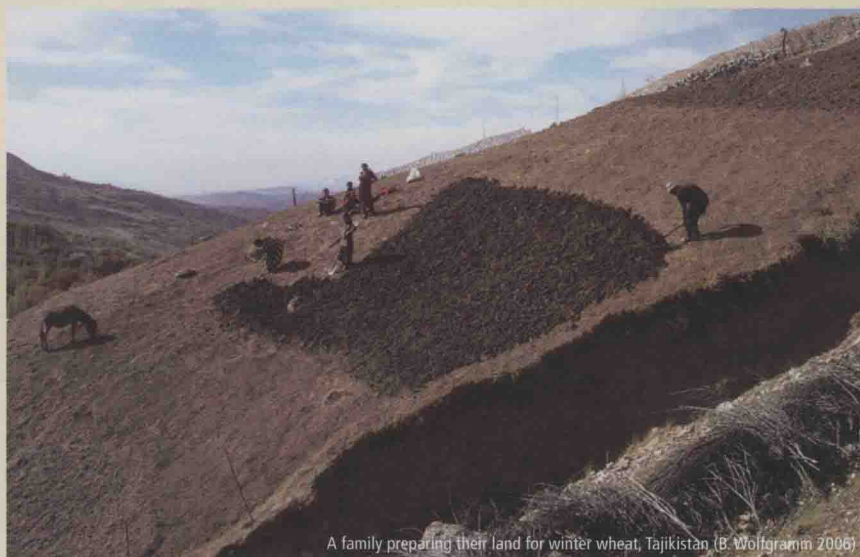
Family enjoying a rest during a hard working day in their small *chacra* (field), Bolivia (S.-L. Mathez-Stiefel)

From a global perspective, mountain farming is family farming. Mountain areas, with their dispersed patches of useable land at different altitudes with different climates and with their often highly fragmented landscapes and narrow limits for mechanization, are most efficiently and effectively managed by family farms.

Family farming in mountains is as diverse as the myriad mountain landscapes of the world, but at the same time, there are also commonalities. For example, mountain family farms are usually not the centres of national production in terms of quantity, with the exception of tropical mountain regions. Most of their production is for family consumption, playing a key role in ensuring household food security. In addition, family farms in mountains help shape mountain landscapes, providing ecosystem services that are vital for development far beyond mountain areas. These services include provision of freshwater, disaster risk reduction, preservation of biodiversity including agro-biodiversity, and space for recreation and tourism.

Family farming communities also are custodians of place identity, spiritual and cultural values, and of site-specific knowledge – a precondition for survival in most mountain areas. The motivation of family farmers thus goes beyond profit maximization, to include social, cultural and ecological motives (1). This is particularly important in mountain areas, where time and resources required for reproductive activities – those that do not directly generate income but are indispensable for maintaining the natural production base – are generally higher than in lowland areas. The terraced landscapes found in all major mountain regions of the world are the most spectacular testimony of such reproductive investment. In addition, family farming in mountains largely operates with low external inputs, most often owing to circumstances rather than choice, meaning that mountain farmers often do not have the means, in terms of physical access or finance, to invest in





A family preparing their land for winter wheat, Tajikistan (B. Wolfram 2006)

external inputs such as fertilizer, plant and animal protection chemicals, let alone machinery.

Accessibility is a key issue in mountain farming, especially in developing countries. But this goes far beyond access to farm inputs – it includes access to basic infrastructures such as health services, schools, roads, transport, markets and communication with the outside world. This lack can be attributed to difficult topography and low population densities relative to lowland areas, factors that increase investment and maintenance costs. Moreover, mountain farmers – like mountain people in general – are often a minority in their countries in terms of numbers. They live far away from the centres of economic and political power and decision-making, and are often marginalized in political, social and economic terms. This is particularly true for communities with livelihoods and farming practices that deviate from global and national mainstreams, such as shifting cultivators or pastoralists, which are both prominent and important in mountain regions. Pastoralists, for example, use large tracts of marginal mountain lands through mobility that would remain unproductive otherwise.

One of the results of marginalization is widespread poverty. Around 40% of mountain populations in developing and transition countries – about 300 million people – are food insecure, with half of them suffering from chronic hunger (2). In response, family farming in many mountain areas is increasingly affected by outmigration. Although those who leave can provide remittances, it also means heavier workloads for those remaining – women, children and the elderly. Limited availability of land that often has low productivity, lack of recognized land tenure rights and population pressure are all elements that can contribute to unsustainable use of mountain natural resources.

The International Year of Family Farming (IYFF) 2014 presents an opportunity to focus attention on the merits and challenges of family farming in mountain areas. Supporting sustainable forms of family farming also promotes food security and a balanced diet and good environmental stewardship. This also recognizes and supports values and traditions that are conducive to securing key ecosystem services that are critical for development and that reach far beyond mountain regions. In mountain areas, family farming often remains an occupation of last resort while, under the right conditions, it could become the backbone for sustainable development. This report highlights examples from mountain areas worldwide that have made inroads towards this aim.

## What is family farming?

According to FAO's working definition, family farming is a means of organizing agricultural, forestry, fisheries, pastoral and aquaculture production that is managed and operated by a family and predominantly reliant on family labour, including both women's and men's. The family and the farm are linked, co-evolve and combine economic, environmental, social and cultural functions.

Family farming is one of the most predominant forms of agriculture worldwide, in both developing and developed countries. Diversity of national and regional contexts, in terms of agro-ecological conditions, territorial characteristics, infrastructure availability (access to markets, roads, etc.), policy environment and demographic, economic, social and cultural conditions, influence family farming structures and functions, as well as livelihood strategies. (3)

Globally, the sector employs 2.6 billion people or 30% of the world's population, and is especially important in developing countries. While family farming covers a wide spectrum of farm sizes and types, ranging from large mechanized farms to smallholdings of a few hectares or less, it is the small family farms, run by small producers, that are by far the most numerous. Globally, they account for about 99% of all people engaged in farming (4).

[www.fao.org/family-farming-2014/en/](http://www.fao.org/family-farming-2014/en/)



