Message from the Director General

International Day for Biological Diversity 2020
Building a future in harmony with nature

This year's theme for the International Day of Biological Diversity, "Our solutions are in nature", is a timely reminder to re-examine our relationship with nature and build back better in a post-pandemic world.

The theme reminds us of the importance of biodiversity and its services for our wellbeing and development, highlighting the interconnections between humans and nature. It is also a tribute to the scientists, conservation professionals, frontline staff and communities whose tireless efforts have helped preserve the last wilderness areas on Earth. I would like to congratulate my ICIMOD colleagues and the other professionals who contribute to the Intergovernmental Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services, which recently won the 2020 WIN WIN Gothenburg Sustainability Award for its "decisive role in outlining the drivers of biodiversity loss, communicating the magnitude of the problem and laying the groundwork for a new agenda and transformative change in relation to biodiversity".

The loss of biodiversity threatens us all. Studies have shown how the emergence and re-emergence of zoonotic disease is closely interlinked with the health of ecosystems. The intrusion into and destruction of wildlife habitats undermines the health and ability of ecosystems to support human wellbeing. The global pandemic highlights more than ever that the world needs to come together and reaffirm its commitment to conserving biodiversity and building a future in harmony with nature.

We at ICIMOD take this opportunity to reflect and highlight nature's contributions towards lives and livelihoods in the Hindu Kush Himalaya (HKH). The HKH is a fragile environment with rich cultural and biological diversity, and diverse ecosystems. The region – with four global biodiversity hotspots, 11 of 200 global ecoregions, 17 world heritage sites, and diverse rangelands, forests, agro-ecosystems and wetlands – provides a range of ecosystem goods and services to the region and beyond. However, the region is also highly susceptible to change, including climate change, with severe impacts on people and nature. The HKH sits at the top of the world and changes happen here before they happen anywhere else. The HKH is therefore the pulse of the planet.

To protect this pulse, ICIMOD has advocated, among other things, the pursuit of nature-based solutions (NbS) that combine the best of age-old traditional practices and modern science to address emerging challenges. This is in recognition of the fact that the wellbeing of mountain people depends on healthy natural

ecosystems that produce a diverse range of ecosystem goods and services. It is well established that nature-based solutions have the potential to mitigate the impacts of climate change, support biodiversity, and sustain the flow of ecosystem services. Over the last three decades, we have worked intensively with partners to conceptualise, plan and promote transboundary landscape initiatives across the HKH that have converted conservation and development challenges into opportunities through integrated approaches that employ NbS tools.

In line with the theme for this year, we have embarked on new NbS initiatives such as the Renewable Energy and Energy Efficiency Capability for the Hindu Kush Himalaya (REEECH) and Air Pollution Solutions (APS) to promote clean energy options and reduce emissions and atmospheric pollution in the region. We are also scaling-up and scaling-out proven nature-based solutions like organic agriculture and soil and water resource conservation interventions, including the rejuvenation of mountain springs, to conserve and sustain the flow of ecosystem services. This is reflected well in field activities carried out under our Resilient Mountain Solutions (RMS) Initiative. Besides, we are taking additional steps to support mountain enterprise development to diversify and improve incomes, build resilience, and enhance the wellbeing of mountain people.

However, the COVID-19 pandemic has resulted in unprecedented challenges and disrupted numerous biodiversity related global events planned for 2020, including the UN Convention on Biological Diversity (CoP 15), creating a hurdle to achieving biodiversity targets in the region. Several biodiversity rich areas are seeing new threats due to numerous scenarios unfolding from the pandemic, including poaching, logging, and other extractive activities. At the same time, the pandemic has resulted in cleaner air and water and a general realisation of the importance of nature and human interactions. The clean air, views of the mountains and wildlife sightings have fired the public imagination and offered glimpses of an alternative future. This is an unprecedented opportunity. We must use this time to reflect on the consequences of our actions on biodiversity and pivot away from business as usual. We are confident that good teamwork and collective efforts across the region will lead to lasting solutions that are inclusive and in harmony with nature. Hopefully new nature-based solutions will emerge from this crisis.

We are working hard to assess the various issues occupying the foreground of conservation and development debates during this pandemic. We will be coming out with a policy document that will look at the impacts, risks, and vulnerabilities that have been exposed by the pandemic, as well as the opportunities for biodiversity conservation in the mountains in a post-pandemic world. We hope that the policy recommendations will guide conservation planning and actions for overcoming existing threats and similar risks that may arise from possible future pandemics.

On IBD 2020, we celebrate our successes over the last three and half decades and recommit ourselves to the biodiversity conservation challenges that lie ahead.

Once again, on behalf of all of my colleagues at ICIMOD, I would like to wish everyone a Happy International Day for Biological Diversity!

Thank you.

David Molden
ICIMOD