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Sustainable management of highland eco-systems: a challenge for research and development

Highland areas are not only sensitive ecosystems but they are also the home of a vast ethnic and cultural diversity. They also provide important ecological functions such as supplying water and conserving biodiversity, economic functions such as supplying food and attracting tourists, and social functions in being the home people, often belonging to ethnic minorities with distinct culture and traditions. Often marginalized in the national development, highland areas nowadays face the problem of poverty and low education. By exploitation of their natural resources – which are often their only endowment – highland communities often deprive themselves of their livelihoods. Moreover, through their influence on interconnected eco-systems and the regional food trade highlands have a strong influence on the environment and the health of the nation as a whole.

The contribution of the scientific community to sustainable management of resources in mountain areas is the development of systems and innovations, which help highland bio economies to conserve the natural richness of the environment and – at the same time – optimize the income for the people in the highlands. These developments includes low emission agriculture in terms of air and water pollution, as well as social equity in development and protection of the natural diversity.

On the occasion of the 50th anniversary of Chiang Mai University, the Faculty of Agriculture organised the 1st International Conference on Asian Highland Natural Resources Management (AsiaHiLand) which concentrated on the following topics:

- The conference had a global focus with particular emphasis on mountain development in Asia.
- The focus was on sharing scientific knowledge that cuts across scientific disciplines and combined insights from the social and natural sciences.
- Studies that discuss how innovations in the field of agricultural science can contribute to natural resources management in highland areas were be emphasized.

To the conference in Chiang Mai more than 200 participants from research, NGOs, as well as members of government institutions and the private sector were present. A total of 96 oral presentation have been presented together with 12 posters. 28 selected articles are published in the present proceedings.

I expect this to be a scientific contribution for the discussion how to promote a sustainbale use and development of the highland areas in Southeast Asia and in the world.

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