

9. Conclusions from the national interviews and reports

As discussed in the previous chapter, policies which affect mountain areas may be specifically focussed on these areas – or more generally focussed, at regional, national or EU scales; and may be sectoral or integrated. In defining future policies, it is essential to take into consideration the impacts of past and current policies, the aims of current policies, and the specific situation with regard to the various themes addressed in Chapters 4 to 7. It has to be recognised, however that, for many of the issues of key concern for policy-making, adequate data are not available at the European scale at the desired degree of detail (i.e., municipalities) – as shown by the review of indicators and the limitations of the analysis described in Chapters 4 to 7 – or even at the national scale. In certain cases, relevant data are only available at a lower level of aggregation, such as NUTS 3 areas, for instance on GDP per capita. Using such data, Copus and Price (2002) showed that mountain regions including urban centres with populations of >100,000 tended to have slightly higher GDP per capita than those without a city. The difference was small, but consistence across all European states. Similarly, particularly low levels of GDP per capita were found in mountain regions which were both peripheral and mountainous; regions which are also characterised by significant population loss. Highly mountainous regions which were accessible had relatively high GDP per capita; while those which are peripheral but less mountainous had relatively low GDP per capita, but not as low as nearby mountain regions. Again, such findings underline the complexity and diversity of situations in the mountain areas of Europe.

To complement the available quantitative data and overcome some of the deficiencies in these data, the national interviews and reports were essential sources of information. It must be recognised, however, that these reports reflect the experience and viewpoints of both the national experts and their interviewees, and therefore cannot be regarded as definitive. These reports were further complemented by responses to questions submitted to regional and European organisations with a sole or major focus on mountain regions (Annex 11); these responses are utilised both in the latter sections of this chapter and in Chapter 11.

9.1. Perceptions of strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats (SWOT)

When attempting to compare and contrast the various national SWOT analyses in the search for common themes or for national or regional disparities, it is important to have in mind the definition of what constitutes a mountainous region. In several countries, the definition established in this study is unfamiliar for national policy-makers. The SWOT analyses were also clearly influenced by whether a particular country is an acceding/candidate country or an EU Member State. This is particularly important with regard to tourism, as discussed below.

The different categories used for organising the SWOT analyses were as follows:

- demography;
- economy;
- tourism;
- environment;

- service provision;
- infrastructure/accessibility;
- agriculture;
- cultural identity.

Demography

In many countries, the demographic development in the mountainous regions, or at least in parts of them, is characterised by depopulation and an ageing of the population. But in some countries or massifs, as discussed in Chapter 5, the mountain population is increasing. Otherwise, the general trend is migration to urban areas. In Switzerland, it is seen as a strength that several mountain areas are situated close to urban poles. In Spain, France, and Sweden the opportunity for the future is the capacity to receive immigrants; while in Poland, possible immigration from Germany is seen as a threat.

Economy

Economy is a wide category, but the general impression is that, in many mountain areas, basic industries are in decline, while the ‘new’ industry – developed to different degrees – is tourism. As already noted, in the acceding and candidate countries it is common to still view tourism as an opportunity for the future, while in the more economically stable countries of the EU15, tourism is already an important industry in many mountain areas: for example, the Alps are one of the global centres of tourism.

Even though basic industries in many cases are in decline, they can still be important. As discussed in Chapter 7, many mountain areas are major sources of energy, especially hydro-electricity, and are important sources for economic development through agriculture, the exploitation of forest resources, water, or minerals.

A threat connected to the demographic development mentioned for several countries is the increased differentiation between mountain areas, especially those which are peripheral, and urban areas which receive in-migration. The labour force and the economic development are increasingly concentrated in the urban centres, while in peripheral areas there is a lack of an educated labour force, and of business development activities.

Tourism

Tourism as a source of employment, income, and development, and as a constituent element of the general attractiveness of an area are all mentioned in the SWOT analyses. Factors relating to the landscape, to the environment (e.g., biodiversity, clean air, snow), and to various aspects of cultural heritage make many mountain areas important for tourism, though this is very unevenly distributed at every scale. Eco-tourism, agro-tourism and ‘wildlife tourism’ (including hunting) are seen as future opportunities for development. Indeed such ‘innovations’ are also seen as a way of preventing the over-exploitation of these regions, which is often mentioned as a significant future threat. Thus, in some cases the potential for conflict between (economic) development and the (environmental or cultural) protection of the region is emerging. The arguments for protection are often the same as those for

development – often being based on the unique environmental and cultural qualities of a particular area.

Environment

Europe's mountains include many regions with high levels of biodiversity, as well as being significant sources of natural resources (minerals, water power, forests). Moreover, given the generally sparse settlement structures and peripheral locations of such regions, many enjoy good environmental conditions. In particular, the mountains along the former 'Iron Curtain' are among the environments least influenced by human activities in Europe.

The over-development of mountain regions or of the areas close to them can thus be seen as a significant future threat to biodiversity and environmental quality. Consequently, notions of 'development potential' are often discussed in terms of the potential inherent in protecting significant parts of mountain areas as national parks, nature reserves, and other types of 'protected area'. However, the purpose of protection varies considerably: from protection of specific habitats and/or species (e.g., through Natura 2000 or national designations) to fostering rural development through opportunities for tourism based on the natural environment and cultural landscapes. Increasingly, protected areas are managed for multiple objectives, often through the definition of different zones with different relative priorities.

Service provision

Many mountain areas suffer from 'natural handicaps' (e.g., complex topography, harsh climate), peripherality, isolation and distance from urban centres, and sparse settlement. For all of these reasons, service provision can be problematic, as discussed in Chapter 7. The general depopulation trend also negatively affects service provision. Many of the SWOT analyses mention co-operative attempts such as intra-regional co-operation initiatives or public-private partnerships as opportunities to come to terms with this problem (Finland, Norway, Spain).

Infrastructure/accessibility

Accessibility is a challenge in many mountain areas due to the physical topography, climate (especially where snow can be heavy in winter), high construction and maintenance costs, and sparse settlement patterns. This is intimately connected to the concerns raised above over service provision. Several SWOT analyses noted that the road and rail infrastructure is inadequately maintained in many mountain areas.

With regard to other types of communication, information and communications technologies (ICT) are highlighted in some of the SWOT analyses as a future opportunity for both business and education, as in the Highlands of Scotland. In regions characterised by sparse settlement and extreme natural conditions, it is important that telephone (land-line or mobile) and Internet communication is facilitated. The prevailing conditions differ greatly from country to country, although this issue was not raised in all of the SWOT analyses.

Agriculture

In many of the acceding and candidate countries, but also in other parts of Europe, small-scale and 'low tech' agriculture still persists in the mountains. Such agriculture contributes little to national economies and in many cases is in decline, leading both to decreases in population and to the expansion of forests. Nevertheless, it remains a potential sector of development when focussed on the production of quality food products, as an environmentally-friendly agricultural production sector in its own right, or coupled with tourism.

Cultural identity

Cultural identity in Europe's mountains is intimately connected to both tourism and agriculture. The old agricultural and handicraft professions remain in some countries, and as such are important sources of identity. Moreover, in many such regions the slow pace of development has preserved a significant architectural and landscape heritage. One example is in Romania; yet the regions with the best-preserved cultural features are also the least developed in terms of modern means of agricultural production. In northern Fennoscandia, the existence of the indigenous Sami culture, an ethnic minority with a long history, is but one such aspect to bear in mind when analysing the region. In Finland, the strengthening of identity is mentioned as an opportunity for the future, and in Italy the lack of co-operation and the need to develop this is mentioned. In Spain, the well-preserved architectural heritage is seen as a strength, as are the traditions still alive because of the relative isolation of the mountain regions. A future threat in all mountain regions is the loss of this historical culture and traditions due to the out-migration of young people. At the same time, the maintenance of culture and traditions can be key to long-term self-determination.

9.2. Strategies for the future

Strategies comprise the aims of current policies, new policies under discussion, and possible new orientations. The above perceptions of strengths and weaknesses in mountain areas are also taken into account.

In most countries, mountain areas are considered to be less developed in comparison to national averages though, as discussed above, this is not always true, and intervening factors, such as accessibility, play key roles. Strategies for mountain development vary considerably, particularly with respect to the type of mountain range (from low 'uplands' to high mountains) and, above all, the level and the process of overall development of each country. Three main types of strategies can be identified:

- reactive strategies;
- proactive strategies;
- sustainable strategies.

Reactive strategies: compensating for handicaps and structural difficulties

In most of the acceding and candidate countries¹, mountains are considered to be disadvantaged areas, where the traditional economy is not adapted to market conditions, and depopulation has to be considered as normal. In these countries, numerous strategies are ‘reactive’, focused primarily on supporting or renewing traditional activities and/or promoting systems of financial compensation for ‘natural handicaps’. The modernisation of agriculture seems everywhere to be the first priority. Future strategies due to enlargement are mainly considered though the new possibilities opened up by financing through the CAP.

The perception is the same in countries where the rapid transition to democracy and liberalism (i.e., Portugal and parts of Spain) has favoured urban regions and lowland areas where modernisation is more easily implemented. Consequently, mountains have been relatively neglected.

Proactive strategies: building a “new mountain economy”

In other countries (Austria, France, Slovenia, Switzerland), development strategies for mountains are more ‘proactive’, targeted at a new mountain economy organized around the tourism industry, quality agricultural products and agro-tourism, transport facilities, and, in some cases, high-tech industries and certain activities in the service sector (e.g., health care, spas). Accessibility is a crucial condition for such developments. In Switzerland, “since the early 1990s Swiss mountains and regional politics has been oriented mainly towards enhancing competitiveness through innovation and deregulation”.

Sustainable strategies: “preserving natural and cultural resources”

In some industrial and urbanised countries (e.g., UK, Sweden), mountain strategies are targeted to land management with particular attention to environmental and conservation issues, involving both governmental and non-governmental environment and heritage organisations. The objective is for mountains to play a role in a rapidly changing society, particularly by responding to urban demands for ‘natural’ environments with opportunities for outdoor recreation.

Nevertheless, there is a convergence of opinion in all countries, suggesting that mountains have new strengths and development opportunities in the globalisation process and in the more open Europe that is now emerging. Urban populations, moreover, increasingly demand adherence to values which include environmental resources such as biodiversity, access to water and forests, historical culture, landscapes, and heritage. A representative of the French agency for regional planning (DATAR) described mountains as “exceptional” areas that require a sustainable development strategy.

Such considerations are to be found in the objectives formulated in the acceding and candidate countries. For example: “The objectives of the development and protection of mountain areas can be achieved gradually, harmonizing economic development

¹ The case of Slovenia is quite different because of the high level of tourism and the existence of traffic corridors.

with the protection of the mountain areas, in the spirit of the balance between the human activities and the ecological request” (expert from the Romanian report).

9.3. National debates

Ongoing national debates and controversies are not often explicitly recorded in the interviews and reports. However, reading ‘between the lines’, some do emerge.

The first debate concerns the usefulness and relevance of mountain policies for territorial management and the possible contradictions with the aim of increased competitiveness. Mountains are often the poorest areas within countries and need focused development policies; but the demographic and economic trends in some mountain areas are better than in other rural areas, especially piedmont areas where the diversification of economic activities is less possible. Mountain areas may not appear to be poorer than other regions; balanced attention is required to address urban poverty and other causes of regional underdevelopment.

The debate on priorities is not always settled between mountain lobbies and other national stakeholders: in some cases, there may not be adequate political will to provide state support for a policy specifically in favour of mountain areas. For instance, in Bulgaria, the mountain act has not yet been approved, partly because it would lead to tax rebates for individuals, local governments, and businesses in mountain areas. In Spain, no mountain zones have ever been declared under the Programmes for the promotion of mountain agrarian resources (PROPRM) established under a 1982 law.

In some countries, there is a kind of ongoing competition for scarce resources between mountains and other less favoured areas. For example, in Portugal, the compensatory allowance system modified in 1999 (reduction of the minimum support value of UAA) is stated to be inequitable to mountain areas in comparison with other less favoured areas. On the other hand, national or regional rural development policies have to encourage the diversification of all economic activities, not just agriculture.

Another debate concerns the unity/specificity and/or diversity of mountain areas. In countries with a great diversity of mountain regions, mountain policy mechanisms have traditionally targeted only high mountain areas, to the detriment of middle mountains where opportunities often offer clearer options for development: in Spain, “The neglect of lower mountain areas has been criticised time and time again, and has recently entered the political debate with new force, as the development gap widens”. For some actors, the promotion of mountain policies needs to underline the specificity of mountain contexts and handicaps. Others argue that the great diversity of the ‘massifs’ implies a need for a more decentralised policy to adjust actions to local strengths and opportunities.

The most frequent debate, however, centres upon the vexed question of finding a balance between development and preservation which is central to sustainable development. More than in any other type of environment, the development of mountain areas poses the problem of ensuring the compatibility of different objectives for sustainable development. How is heavy investment in urban development and transport systems to be reconciled with the preservation of environments? How can

economic activities be modernised and rural depopulation avoided? How can the exploitation and preservation of resources be balanced?

9.4 The potential application of experience from existing mountain policies

Many EU Member States have established, and over time improved, relatively coherent and effective policies for mountain areas; particularly France and Italy, whose experience is now being referred to as the candidate countries of Bulgaria and Romania develop their own mountain policy. A number of lessons can be drawn from this experience, which might contribute to future European mountain policy.

Contexts

Analysis of the national contexts within which national mountain policies are most advanced shows a number of contributing characteristics:

- adequate recognition of the importance of mountain areas;
- a long history of actions in favour of mountain areas, deriving from the recognition of their reality, the delineation of specific zones, the implementation of specific measures, and the progressive development of explicit policy;
- clearly identifiable mountain areas (massifs), clearly differentiated from adjacent areas by their socio-economic characteristics, with a critical mass in terms of area and population, and a clear trans-regional character;
- mountain areas which have evolved in terms of significant economic diversification (i.e., not only agricultural areas) and have recognised the challenges of multiple development, and thus are different from classical rural areas;
- mountain areas where heritage and economic values interest all of society, including urban populations;
- organised political and economic actors, which are able to work together, elaborate strategies, influence national decisions, and contribute to the local implementation of policies;
- a favourable institutional context, which associates decentralisation and recognition of the role of the state.

Principal dimensions of the most advanced policies

Analysis of the situation in the countries with the most advanced policies permits the identification of many dimensions with regard to their content and means of application:

- legal recognition of mountain areas through texts which give specific competences to mountain communities, or specific advantages for economic actors and/or populations in mountain areas;
- an open and balanced delineation of mountain areas, integrating natural areas, high-altitude rural areas, and towns whose functioning is tied directly to a particular mountain area;
- recognition that mountain areas are trans-regional, through debate, perception, and decision-making, as well as financial means. These aspects raise problems because they can lead to competition with the regional power;

- examples of joint action, open to all stakeholders, both nationally and in individual mountain areas;
- measures and policies which address all dimensions of mountain economies, the social problems of their populations (especially regarding services), the management and preservation of natural resources and landscapes, and the management of natural hazards;
- a strong national setting in which the state plays an important role in: affirming the specificity of mountain areas and their importance to the national economy and to society; encouraging cooperation between mountain areas and regions; and arbitrating with regard to major sectoral and territorial priorities, especially those relating to infrastructure policy;
- specific tools for monitoring, research, and training. Major changes occur in mountain areas, and it is critical to understand and anticipate these through specialised institutions.

Possible transfers

The various elements noted under the first section above ('contexts') are not absolutely necessary for the establishment and successful implementation of mountain policy. However, in certain cases (especially in small countries), and for certain issues, they can only be satisfied in a trans-national context, which gives particular responsibility to the EU as well as mountain stakeholders.

As shown throughout this report, there is an extreme diversity of situations across the mountains of Europe in terms of physical characteristics, level of development, institutions, evolutionary trends, and challenges for the future. Consequently, it is not reasonable to directly transfer the various rules and practices which have been proved in the countries with the most advanced mountain policies. However, a number of lessons can be identified for future action by the European Commission, which could:

- assert its convictions and strategy with regard to the place of mountain areas within European territory – which has been largely done;
- request Member States to define their objectives with regard to development in mountain areas and their expectations from the Commission;
- propose to Member States what needs to be done through coordination and the delineation of trans-national mountain ranges;
- encourage cooperation which permits reinforcement of the inter-regional nature of mountain ranges and the establishment of partnerships and trans-national programmes in specific mountain ranges;
- consider, jointly with Member States and regions, whether it is preferable for mountain ranges to have specific programmes or to be areas where regional policies are coordinated. The issue of the role of sub-regional institutions should be addressed, especially when mountains occupy only a small proportion of a region;
- list the priorities and themes for possible contracts with the authorities of each mountain range;
- propose integrated actions with common objectives to a number of Directorates-General;
- support initiatives of trans-national organisations of mountain stakeholders;

- support monitoring, research, and training.

9.5. Summary of expectations for future policies

EU Policy: A high level of expectation

Both the national reports and the responses of key organisations express a high level of expectation with regard to a mountain policy framed and supported by the European Commission, though expectations differ between respondents in Member States and acceding/candidate countries. However, it must be recognised that mountain ‘actors’ try to ‘legitimise’ their position, and that their views are not necessarily those of political stakeholders. An EU policy can provide a kind of umbrella for national lobbies whether focussing on mountains or other issues.

To be efficient, an EU policy has to be implemented through national or regionally visible decisions. The official position of Member States has not been formally assessed in this study. However, a number of acts or decrees in this regard are currently awaiting approval at national level.

Mountain areas have great diversity, which should initiate regional adaptations

As shown throughout the previous chapters, there is great diversity both within and between the massifs, and also in links to the regional contexts. The region seems to be the preferred level of implementation most often quoted by interviewees, but some expressed a lack of confidence between mountain areas and urban centres, fearing that most funding will go to regional urban centres. The EU has to solve the problem of a minimum common approach with regard to mountain issues and the diversity of local contexts. Considering the great variety of situations, what common approach could be considered for a European mountain policy?

Mountain policies have to be more open, with less emphasis on agriculture

All modalities of economic development are wished for by different interviewees, but within the context of safeguarding traditional activities; and there is frequent reference to tourism. Agriculture, as well as forest management, must play an important role, but other economic activities are often more crucial to maintain population levels. As shown in Chapter 6, the primary sector has the lowest proportion of employment in the mountains of the study area, even though the proportion is higher than at the national scale. The importance of both manufacturing and the tertiary sector in mountain areas need to be better recognised.

Need for a high level of subsidiarity is intended

There are various development approaches to solve the problems of poor upland regions, particularly through the promotion of innovation and partnership – as in many LEADER projects. Due to the diversity of situations encountered in mountain areas, policy initiatives should be based on a ‘bottom up’ approach, with multi-level, multi-scale implementation. Equally, the potential deriving from exchanges of experience and good practice imply the need to establish a substantial set of tools and general aims in a more top-down manner.

Trans-national and trans-regional initiatives may be particularly interesting when carried out between EU Member States and acceding or candidate countries

Transnational co-operation is often quoted as a relevant tool for addressing specific problems (e.g., cross-border traffic, risk management, management of large carnivores), and for reinforcing economic projects and the exchange of know-how between Member States and acceding or candidate countries. Europe-wide networks such as Euromontana, AEM, and the European Mountain Forum are important in this regard. It is notable that these three organisations have recently established a committee to coordinate their activities.

Northern countries are attached to the mountain equivalence of their natural conditions

Since the accession of Finland and Sweden to the EU, parts of their sub-arctic and arctic areas have been treated as equivalent to mountains with regard to the disbursement of LFA funds. This equivalence remains a major concern in these Nordic States, particularly recognising that, as shown in Chapter 5 and 7, these regions are also peripheral, with low populations (in terms of both number and density), and therefore of concern in the context of debates on social and economic cohesion.