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Contribution of the Alpine Convention to the process towards a Macro-regional Strategy for the Alps (an “Input paper”)

INTRODUCTION AND STRUCTURE OF THE INPUT PAPER

BACKGROUND

The idea behind a macro-regional strategy is that better cooperation and coordination is useful in order to address specific challenges common to certain transboundary areas in a more efficient and effective way than by means of individual initiatives. By resolving issues in a relatively small group of countries and regions the way may be cleared for better cohesion at the level of the European Union. After the launch of the strategies for the Baltic Sea Region and the Danube Region, respectively in 2009 and 2011, the time is ripe for a debate on a possible macro-regional strategy for other regions. Even though there is no standard definition for macro-region, the definition used here refers to the Baltic Sea Region process, defining a macro-region as “an area including territory from a number of different countries or regions associated with one or more common features or challenges.” The Alps share those characteristics and fit well in this definition. They can therefore reasonably start a debate on a possible macro-regional strategy for their territory.

A macro-regional strategy for the Alps in order to reach the “Europe 2020” objectives

The Alpine Conference would like to contribute to the discussion towards macro-regional cooperation within the alpine area and the possible drafting of a macro-regional strategy (MRS) for the Alps. This new concept could help to improve policy consistency and can lead to a more effective implementation of some common strategic targets within multi-level governance. A macro-regional approach aims at enhancing the prosperity and the cohesion of the territory of the Alps according to the Europe 2020 growth strategy and its objectives to achieve smart, sustainable and inclusive growth, essentially through the strengthening of the dialog between the organisations and institutions, especially the ETC-Programme Alpine Space and the initiatives of the governments of some Alpine Regions (such as ARGE ALP, COTRAO, ALPE ADRIA), that already operate in the alpine region and the support of the connection between a wider number of actors inside and outside the Alps on the one hand, and creating synergies and added value among different activities and projects in the area on the other. The MRS aims at establishing ambitious sustainable development goals.

The position of the Alpine Convention

Based on the decisions of the XIth Alpine Conference (2011), a Working Group (WG) was given a mandate to contribute to the current debate on European MRS by using the framework of the Alpine Convention with its balanced approach between development and conservation, its geographic and thematic scope of implementation, and its twenty years experience in transnational cooperation in the Alps, as well in tackling common challenges and preserving the identity of the area based on the principle of partnership among different levels and relevant stakeholders.

STRUCTURE OF THE INPUT PAPER

The input paper is structured in three chapters:

1. *Alpine Specific issues*
2. *The Alpine Convention added-value*
3. *Key messages and perspectives*

In order to focus the action of a possible MRS, the first chapter highlights the key issues specifically related to the Alps, by classifying them into two main categories: *Natural resources and resources management* and *Networks and competitiveness*.

In relation to these broad categories, the second chapter describes in greater detail the added value of a possible Alpine MRS, highlighting the contribution of the Alpine Convention as an international Treaty and of its resources (documents, results of its working group, platform and networks ...).

The third chapter is devoted to highlight key messages and perspectives of the Alpine area, presenting the potential of the Alpine Convention as a key political framework for the development of the mountain territory, fostering innovation in the Alps as a “laboratory” on sustainable development, and improving coordination at and within all levels in order to achieve common goals and create synergies among different actions.

Chapter 1 - Alpine Specific issues

The Alps constitute a transnational territory with shared challenges and potentials. The main challenge and therefore the overarching issue for the Alpine region is to harmonise protection and economic development with the objective to sustain the Alps as a living space for people and nature as well as economic area. The shared features in the Alps can be described by reference to two main broad areas:

Natural Resources and Resource management encompasses the main challenges that mountain areas are facing today in relation to the use and management of the natural capital of the Alps, taking also into account cross-cutting issues such as climate change issues and the relationships between the Alps and their surroundings (especially metropolitan areas). This first category broadly corresponds with the environmental pillar of sustainability.

Networks and competitiveness refers to the challenges of social and economic character.

The cross cutting nature of issues such as energy or transport implies that these challenges may well fall under both broad categories, the distinction is therefore meant as purely indicative, in order to streamline the discussion and focus on strategic priorities.

a. NATURAL RESOURCES AND RESOURCE MANAGEMENT

The Alps represent the second largest biodiversity hot spot of Europe, after the Mediterranean Sea. Construction of transport infrastructures, tourist housing, industry and commerce as well as intensive agricultural land use and infrastructures may entail fragmentation and negative effects on the nature and landscape. Furthermore, the topography and altitude in the alpine regions as well as the richness in water and forests make the Alps suitable for energy production. For example, the production of hydroelectricity for the provision of urban conglomerates surrounding the alpine area creates conflicts of interests inside the territory which need to be taken into due account. Win-win-situations should be created in order to meet the needs of both urban and mountain areas.

Within the natural resources management topic, the following issues have to be stressed:

- Ecosystem services, green economy (such as sustainable tourism): the recognition and valuation of alpine ecosystem services, comprising traditional land use, as well as its close interaction with cultural, architectural elements (i.e. cultural landscape) can promote sustainable development of the Alps. As the Alps are storing natural capital, fair payment for goods and services having an economic value (e.g. water purification and supply, recreation and health, mountain farming, biochemical for pharmaceuticals, carbon sequestration, etc.) can disclose this hidden stock. These ecosystems and their services have to be preserved in their integrity. The recognition, acceptance and valuation of mountain ecosystem services and their reflection in market mechanisms can become, in the transition to a green economy, innovative motivations for policies consistent with the preservation of the multi-functionality of alpine ecosystems and biodiversity, while creating also “green jobs”. The landscape and the preserved nature is in particular the basis for Alpine attractiveness. Therefore it is necessary to

promote sustainable tourism offers, also in light of climate change. A green economy can also become a political or economic strategy for the development of the Alpine regions and constitute a common goal for all the Alpine actors, leading to shared axes of development for the Alps. An indispensable pre-condition is a greater common effort to recognise the value of the alpine landscapes.

- Energy: it is important to increase energy efficiency and the share of renewable energy production (particularly important in the Alps with regard to the mitigation of climate change), and at the same time, reduce the impact on the territory (landscape, biodiversity), in particular in rural areas, which will in the future be the main contributors to the production of energy from decentralized, renewable sources. Furthermore, the existence of transnational catchment areas and the perspective of significant changes in precipitations call for coordinated transnational policies.
- Integrated and sustainable water management is one of the main issues for the sustainable development of the alpine region. Water for human consumption, irrigation and hydroelectricity constitutes a premium resource of the Alps. Since the areas surrounding the Alps greatly depend on water from the alpine region for their development, different expectations arise. These potential conflicts may be aggravated by climate change. The Alps constitute the water tower of Europe as well as a huge producer of renewable energies, with a high potential as an energy storage system (“battery” function). For transboundary river basins, a balanced management of this resource and its preservation (qualitative and quantitative) requires transboundary cooperation. Therefore a number of international river basin commissions have been established in the past. Also the water framework directive sets a policy framework that puts the river basins in the centre for coordinated planning. Many water-related problems are similar in the alpine countries. It is therefore an added value if common research activities are triggered and coordinated. Moreover, exchange of experiences and good practices supports the alpine countries in their activities to take the right measures for the challenges ahead.
- Landscape and biodiversity. There is a need to raise awareness on the intrinsic and also economic value of landscape and biodiversity as providers of ecosystem services being influenced by infrastructure development and the urban areas surrounding the Alps as well as by activities such as agriculture and energy production and distribution. Climate change impact on landscape and biodiversity requires specific consideration and measures.
- Protected areas and biodiversity preservation: development pressure and climate change do significantly harm the alpine biodiversity. In order to avoid further biodiversity loss it is very important to preserve and, where necessary, extend natural habitats and to create ecological connectivity within the Alps and their surrounding area. To this end, transnational coordination is needed;
- Natural risks: in order to ensure better cooperation and information sharing, as risks are not only local. Furthermore, coordinated measures for adaptation to climate change are needed;

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- Alpine forests, beyond their ecological and nature value, are both a protection against flooding, avalanches, etc. and an economic resource in terms of construction material and renewable energy source. They are facing multiple threats, mostly from outside the forest sector, like tourism, airborne pollution or fragmentation. Mitigating these threats as far as they are typical for mountainous areas could profit from cross-border cooperation and activity also in light of the climate change mitigation and adaptation goals agreed at international level.
 - Soil consumption in the Alps is still not managed in a sustainable way both quantitatively and qualitatively and has various negative impacts as for example land take, soil sealing, urban sprawl and increasing costs for the construction and maintenance of infrastructures;

b. NETWORKS AND COMPETITIVENESS

The Alps, as all mountain ranges, pose challenges to communication and physical accessibility. Still, the remoteness of certain locations is related to their attractiveness. The alpine natural and cultural landscapes represent important resources for sustainable development. Furthermore, the geographic specificities related to the mountain topography resulted in a rich linguistic and cultural diversity. The challenge between improved accessibility, transit facilities and preservation of unspoiled land is indeed one of the most relevant economic and social-related governance issues in the alpine area. In this context, a macro-regional strategy could serve the purpose of:

- Building on the relationships between peri-alpine cities and alpine regions and strengthening partnership. The urban conglomerates offer job and education opportunities but entail the risk of partly transforming rural alpine areas into 'dormitories' (peri-urbanization). Inner alpine cities risk losing out some of their function as regional centres. Related to these trends is the continuous decrease of public services (fostering digital divide), which itself is related to reduced public funding. To ensure the sustainable development of alpine rural areas as living space for people and nature is essential;
- Population, education, employment and culture: innovative solutions are needed in order to hinder brain drain and depopulation of remote areas, maintain services of general interest also in the small centres, address changes in the demographic structure such as ageing of population and new inhabitants, foster the diffusion of new technologies and address digital divide, better connect schools and universities, promote innovation and the development of clusters based on regional expertise and strengths of regional companies, as well as mobile services. In this context, sustainable tourism can avoid depopulation to a large extent, by securing jobs in the region.
- Transport is an essential topic for the Alps, as a territory with specific vulnerabilities at the crossroads of Europe. In order to connect remote areas and reduce the negative impacts of transport means (e.g. air quality, greenhouse gases, land take, traffic congestion) coordinated transnational policies for both transalpine and intra-alpine mobility are needed.
 - o Coordination and integration between instruments. There is a clear need for better integration between existing framework and processes dealing with transport issues in the Alps (Alpine Convention Working Group, Zurich Group, regional actors, Basis Tunnels Intergovernmental Conferences);

- Freight Transport issues. Besides further actions to develop freight transport in a sustainable manner, one of the key elements related to sustainable development in the Alps is the shift from road to rail freight transport. In this context, a number of interests are of relevance, not least EU TENs. In light of the subsidiarity and sustainability principles, there is a clear need to coordinate European and national transport policies and intra-alpine needs as well as infrastructure investments;
- Passenger Mobility issues. It is important to level out the imbalances between integrated and remote areas, maintain public services in remote or marginalised areas and promote eco-friendly mobility also with regard to the tourism sector. Furthermore, urban mobility, which usually insists on the same valley floor where trans-boundary freight traffic flows, is a challenge to be addressed.

Chapter 2 - The Alpine Convention added-value

Through this section the Alpine Convention, as an international Treaty for the Alps centred on trans-boundary cooperation, comprising eight thematic Protocols and acting through several Working Groups and Platforms, intends to share its experience by presenting some key messages and topics in view of a possible future European MRS for the Alps from the Alpine Convention perspective. It therefore presents the topics the Alpine Convention considers to be relevant for the purposes of a MRS and where it could bring an added-value.

The following table is meant to sum up the contribution of the Alpine Convention and the added value of an Alpine MRS in relation to the alpine specific issues identified in the Chapter 1.

CATEGORY	ALPINE-SPECIFIC ISSUE	KEY MESSAGES	ALPINE CONVENTION RESOURCES	EXPECTED ADDED VALUE OF A MRS
NATURAL RESOURCES and RESOURCES MANAGEMENT	Ecosystem services , green economy and tourism	Better management of the territory in a sustainable way through the market based mechanisms of ecosystem services can be obtained only through coordinated policies at international level	Protocols (e.g Mountain farming art.7.2. , Forests, Tourism) Action Plan Climate 3 rd Report on the State of the Alps Integrated approach in many sectors Working groups, experience, data and research 4 th Report on the State of the Alps Working Group UNESCO World Heritage	Better use and preservation of assets, job creation Improved acceptance of market based mechanisms for ecosystem services and role of mountains in this field Implementation of policies and measures in relation to tourism as a fragile tower of ecosystem services and as provider of jobs within the region
NATURAL RESOURCES and RESOURCE	The Alps as a water tower of	Water (both drinking water and water for other	Platform water management in the Alpine Area:	Exchange of experiences and good practices among the alpine countries Coordinated action where necessary (e.g.

MANAGEMENT	drinking water and huge producer of renewable energy (including energy storage)	uses) is a vital common resource that needs to be preserved and managed, where necessary in a transboundary context	Data, reports, awareness, 2 nd Report on the States of the Alps, Action Plan Climate, knowhow and experience exchange Coordination of research Coordination with other working groups and platforms dealing with impact of water policies (PLANALP, Ecological Network)	research) Possibilities for common research
NATURAL RESOURCES and RESOURCES MANAGEMENT	Landscape, biodiversity and connectivity	Maintaining biodiversity in particular in order to avoid habitats fragmentation and threats to connectivity. A better implementation of international and European frame conditions on alpine level (CBD, EU strategy on biodiversity), better linkages to other policy fields like spatial and land use planning, better adjustment of funding instruments and a better involvement of local actors including land owners is needed. Gaps regarding the knowledge on biodiversity issues have to be filled up and better exchanged among the countries.	Protocols (Nature protection, Land Planning and others), Action Plan Climate Platform Ecological Network, Alpine Network of Protected areas Experience of pilot regions Link to specific sectors (agriculture, predators, forests, water, UNESCO)	Increased awareness on both ecologic and economic value of the Alps as a European hot spot of biodiversity and cultural assets (alpine cultural landscape). Better horizontal (in terms of territories) and vertical (in terms of competencies) implementation of biodiversity and landscape protection issues in Alpine policies. Better tackling of connectivity issues (e.g rivers) and link to other "green belts" of Europe
NETWORKS AND COMPETITIVENESS	Relationships, population, education, employment and culture	Promote a more balanced socio-economic development while taking into account alpine specificities and demographic change in the Alps	Protocol Land planning, Declaration Population and Culture 3 rd Report on the State of the Alps Working group, data, analysis Existing networks (i.e. Alliance in the Alps, Alpine cities...)	Enhanced dialogue mountains-large cities, better awareness of the interdependencies Work on a functional relationships between diverse areas Implementation of policies to face ageing, loss of basic services brain drain and digital divide Innovation and sustainable growth Develop integrated information tools
NETWORKS	Transport	All transalpine	Protocol on Transport	Improved coordination between existing

AND COMPETITIVENESS	corridors are interdependent as any change in one alpine corridor is affecting all the other. An effective international management of trans-alpine transport is urgently needed. Promotion of sustainable mobility models within the Alps and access from the Alps.	Working Group Transport Action Plan Climate 1 st Report on the State of the Alps Specific experience on risk management and natural hazard (platform PLANALP) improving cost-effectiveness of infrastructure investments	bodies and cooperation instruments Enhanced possibility to focus on internal mobility issues in the Alps, including regional disparities Implementation of policies and measures in relation to tourist transport (soft mobility, e-mobility)
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Chapter 3. Key messages and perspectives

As stated in the Europe 2020 strategy, Europe can succeed if it acts collectively, as a Union. The same applies to the Alps which as territorial platform at the heart of the continent need a common strategy to pursue a development based on smart, sustainable and inclusive economy delivering high levels of environment protection, employment, productivity and social cohesion.

The challenge between the need to preserve nature and territory and the economic development is more visible in the Alps than in other areas, such as plains and large cities. The Alpine Convention is an important political framework for the protection and the development of the mountain territory and in this sense it should foster innovation in the Alps as a “laboratory” on sustainable development, allowing local population to keep living and working in it. This needs to address both the issue of the management of the Alps and of the relationship with the surrounding areas, which are inter-linked with the Alps through functional relationships. In this sense, the Alps with their surroundings appear to fulfil the conditions set by the EU Commission for the development of a new macro-regional strategy, which represents a great opportunity to enhance governance aimed at more efficiently balancing different interests.

Therefore the Alpine Convention supports strong governance processes for the Alps and the surrounding areas and underlines the need to have an open and broad stakeholder dialogue in order to develop a widely accepted MRS. It is important to extend the debate to surrounding areas which, though not falling under the territory of the Alpine Convention, greatly influences economic, social and environmental developments in the alpine area. This is the case of large urban areas surrounding the Alps. The objective is to strengthen a framework of dialogue between the Alps and their surroundings, contributing to create or adapt procedures to ensure the balancing of interests of the mountain region and its inhabitants and the surrounding areas. It might be pursued also thanks to innovative solutions to address the challenge between nature conservation and economic development, and providing the functional integration of services in broader area. The MRS should lead to more solidarity and stronger partnerships between the mountain areas and the large urban con-

glomerates. The Alpine Convention shall propose how these procedures should be organised with the special focus on the participation for the mountain regions.

In this context, the Alpine Convention – on the one hand - sees its role in contributing to find solutions which enhance chances of sustainable development and at once ensure the protection of the Alps.

On the other hand the Alpine Convention can specifically contribute to the process with its knowledge and twenty years' experience of sustainable development in the alpine area: The Alpine Convention considers it important that the objectives and features of a possible MRS are brought into a wide discussion with all concerned levels, in order to benefit as much as possible from the bottom-up approach that characterises the Convention. To this end, the Alpine Convention offers a wide range of networks (municipalities, alpine cities and regions, touristic destinations, protected areas).

The possible macro-regional strategy for the Alps would be an opportunity to:

ACT TOGETHER TOWARDS COMMON GOALS

- To harmonise protection and economic development in the Alpine region with the objective to sustain the Alps as living space for people and nature as well as economic area;
- Better position the Alps in Europe (protection of nature, water, energy, ecosystem services);
- Create new networks and responses to functional relations, for example between alpine areas and surrounding areas in order to meet the EU 2020 goals, improve the condition of disadvantaged areas, protect nature and to better use the territorial potential;
- Further enhance existing network relations and provide additional quality to the alpine cooperation;
- Involve actors on a wider scale in terms of topics and geographical scope in order to find more balanced solutions for common challenges;
- Give a central place to inner alpine medium-sized cities and make good use of their potentials, enhancing the functional relationships with surrounding rural and mountain areas;
- Ensure the sustainable development of alpine rural areas as living space for people and nature as well as economic area
- Better deal with regional disparities;

SHARE KNOWLEDGE AND POLICIES

- Facilitate the engagement of EU policies and measures that support projects addressing i.a. the impacts of traffic, including by developing a network that fosters the exchange of experiences across the region;
- Find agreements between alpine areas and surrounding urban areas in order to internalize the external costs, increase the recognition of ecosystem services and creating job opportunities in mountain areas.
- Further reconcile development goals with the protection and cautious use of natural resources, especially providing better maintenance of water resources and biodiversity;
- Better coordination/implementation of policies to face ageing, brain drain and the decrease of basis services.
- Efficient implementation of mitigation/adaptation measures

IMPROVE COOPERATION AT AND BETWEEN ALL LEVELS

- cooperation through various forms of networking is essential in order to find a common perspective among stakeholder, to share best practices, stimulate mutual learning and understanding, and achieve synergies and added value of separate actions of other actors;
- the need of developing effective coordination among relevant stakeholders underlines the need to initiate an open and broad stakeholder dialogue;
- extending the debate to surrounding areas which, though not falling under the alpine territory, greatly influence economic, social and environmental developments in the alpine area; the objective is to establish a framework of dialogue between the Alps and their surroundings, contributing to create or adapt procedures to ensure the balancing of interests of the mountain region and its inhabitants and the surrounding areas;
- stimulate and develop innovative solutions to address the challenge between nature conservation and economic development, and providing the functionality of services in broader area;
- assuring more solidarity and stronger partnerships between the mountain areas and the large urban conglomerates.

A coordinated and harmonized development process for a MRS would require a structured stakeholder's dialogue to identify and jointly address specific needs and the definition of the contribution of mountain areas. Urban and rural areas depend on each other and are connected in various ways. These interdependencies must be considered carefully and partnerships must be built and strengthened. Therefore a special need of developing strong governance processes for the Alps and the surrounding areas can be identified and an open and broad stakeholder dialogue in order to develop a widely accepted MRS shall be initiated: to achieve that, a framework of dialogue between the Alps and their surroundings shall be established, with the objective to ensure the reconciliation of interests of the mountain region and its inhabitants and the surrounding areas. The Alpine Conference supports the need of developing strong governance processes for the Alps in order to develop a widely accepted MRS.