

Sustainable Mountain Development Beyond Rio 20: Regional and National Perspectives

Authors: Scheurer, Thomas, and Jost, Silvia

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Sustainable Mountain Development Beyond Rio+20: Regional and National Perspectives



The integration of Chapter 13 on sustainable development of mountain regions into Agenda 21 at the Rio conference in 1992 (UNCED 1992; see link 1 below) was the starting point for the political globalization of mountains. A wide range of international and national networks have been established since then, and important international organizations are promoting mountain issues. In Switzerland, the Interacademic Commission for Alpine Studies (ICAS) established a network of Swiss scientists in 1994 to promote interdisciplinary research in the field of sustainable mountain development.

Mountains as a global concern in 2012

In the context of Rio+20, green economy and institutional frameworks are seen as the main drivers of sustainable development. Specific concerns about mountain regions were discussed from a global perspective at conferences in Kathmandu (Nepal) and Lucerne (Switzerland) in 2011. The results of these discussions are summarized in the *Kathmandu Declaration on Green Economy and Sustainable Development* (7 September 2011) and in the *Lucerne Call for Action* (11 October 2011) (see links 2 and 3 below). Both documents constitute a global political agenda for the sustainable use of resources in mountains that will benefit about half of the Earth's population by improving social, cultural, environmental, and economic conditions for mountain people.

This global political agenda needs to be differentiated according to regional and national conditions. During the above-mentioned Lucerne Conference, considerations of the Rio

process since 1992 were made from the (regional) perspective of the Alpine Convention (organized by the Swiss Presidency of the Alpine Convention) and from the (national) perspective of Switzerland (organized by ICAS).

The Alpine Convention as an institutional framework for sustainable mountain development

Since its creation in 1991, the Alpine Convention has been promoting cooperation among the 8 signatory parties (Austria, France, Germany, Italy, Slovenia, Switzerland, and the Principalities of Monaco and Liechtenstein) and with up to 15 nongovernmental observers to foster sustainable development in the European Alps.

The specific role of the Alpine Convention is determined by its institutional and strategic framework for transnational cooperation, which is based on international law. Although the Alpine Convention was conceived before Rio 1992, it has been operating on the principles of sustainable development for 20 years. A balance of the transnational processes in the Alpine Space since 1992 (Alps Report; see link 4 below) has highlighted the fact that, besides the actors involved in the Alpine Convention (contracting parties, secretariat, working groups, and platforms), 2 other main drivers are active in the implementation of sustainable development on a transnational level: the programs of the European Territorial Cooperation, especially the Alpine Space program, and transnational organizations and networks, including, among many others, CIPRA–Living in

the Alps, ArgeAlp, the Network of Alpine Protected Areas, the community network Alliance in the Alps, and the International Scientific Committee for Alpine Research.

In its submission for the United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development 2012 (see link 5 below), the Alpine Convention makes claims for mountain-specific approaches to sustainable development. Based on the experience of the past 20 years, the Alpine Convention emphasizes that multinational, multisectoral, multistakeholder, and multilevel approaches must be adopted for transnational cooperation.

The *institutional framework* of the Convention allows, in particular, for multinational, multilevel, and multistakeholder cooperation. Because only the framework convention (see link 6 below) is legally binding (international law) for all contracting parties, most transnational agreements and forms of cooperation (eg concerning the implementation of thematic protocols) are not binding on a transnational level as Switzerland, Italy, and the European Union have not yet ratified the Convention's protocols. With concerning the *territorial setting*, a major challenge for the Alpine Convention will be to shift its actions from current administrative units (the perimeter of the Convention) to functional areas, taking account of the growing dependence between urban areas, and mountain areas and also directly involving alpine regions (multilevel approach).

Based on the Convention's multiannual work program (2011–2016), the foci in the promotion of *green economy* are efficient use and management of resources (mainly

FIGURE 1 Val Müstair (Eastern Swiss Alps) is suffering from marginalization. New initiatives for maintaining the population through sustainable economic activities are being developed within the framework of the New Swiss Regional Policy and the UNESCO Biosphere Reserve (in cooperation with the Swiss National Park). (Photo courtesy of Turissem Val Müstair)



water, biodiversity, landscape, primary production), valuation of ecosystem services, renewable energy production, transport, and tourism. Moreover, the integration of economic actors and investors must be tackled (multisectoral and multistakeholder approach) to overcome the traditionally “environmentalist” image of the Convention.

Are the Alps polarizing Switzerland?

Since 1991 (signature of the Alpine Convention) and 1992 (adoption of Chapter 13 in Agenda 21), a large number of organizations, programs, and initiatives with a focus on

mountain issues have been initiated in or by Switzerland (see link 7 below). Both the Alpine Convention and Chapter 13 have had a direct impact on numerous activities in science, international cooperation, and national networking.

However, in following a general trend, Switzerland is shifting toward an urban society, even in the Alps, where more than 60% of the population now lives in urban centers. Consequently, the Swiss Alps are far from being a homogeneous area: they are a colorful pattern of rural and urban areas with prosperous and less prosperous regions. Furthermore, there is no single mountain policy; a long list of policies and subsidies defines the

development of the Swiss Alps. Nevertheless, parts of some Swiss mountain areas are becoming marginalized and disparities within the Alps are increasing (Figure 1). What then is the social and political significance of the Alps in Switzerland? This question was discussed by 4 experts during a symposium organized by the Swiss Academies of Sciences and its ICAS on 10 October 2011 in Lucerne (see link 8 below).

A brief overview of insights presented at the ICAS symposium

In 1992 in Rio, Switzerland, was one of the key players in promoting mountains as an ecosystem of global relevance. The main actors at the

conclusion of Chapter 13 were an international network of scientists associated with Bruno Messerli (loosely called the “Mountain Agenda”), and Swiss diplomacy led by the Swiss Agency for Development and Environment (SDC). According to historian Jon Mathieu at the University of Lucerne, Switzerland, 2 historic preconditions favored this success. On one hand, there has been a global scientific focus on mountains since Humboldt, which was still present after 1970 (in the work of Carl Troll and the UNESCO Program Man and Biosphere). On the other hand, Switzerland has a long tradition in development cooperation in mountain countries such as Peru, Nepal, and Rwanda.

Proposing a mountain chapter (Chapter 13) at the Rio conference, Switzerland presented itself as a self-confident advocate for mountain regions. After Rio 1992, implementation of the mountain chapter in Switzerland was taken up primarily by the SDC (development cooperation, research) and the Swiss Academies of Sciences (mountain research). Maya Tissafi (deputy director general of SDC) points out that the Swiss commitment to mountain states has been extended since 1992. In the past 10 years, financial resources have been tripled and today represent 14% of all SDC expenditures.

Contrary to its global positioning as a mountain country, Switzerland is very cautious when it comes to the Alpine Convention. According to Paul Messerli of the University of Bern, this raises the issue of plausibility. Although the mountain chapter in Agenda 21 is not binding, the Alpine Convention is international law and, therefore, is opposed from different sides: the Parliament fears intervention from abroad, the mountain cantons resent dominant protection, urban agglomerations fear the creation of a mountain OPEC (Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries, as an allusion to the importance of

the Alpine cantons for energy production by hydropower), and skeptics criticize long-lasting processes or obsolete protocols. As a result, to date, Switzerland has ratified only the framework Convention but none of the protocols and is decried for blocking the evolution of the Convention. Nevertheless, Switzerland is very active in the different bodies of the Alpine Convention and holds the presidency for 2011–2012.

Although Swiss actions in foreign Alpine and mountain affairs have been successful, the Swiss Alps are at risk of losing their political significance by comparison with urban agglomerations. Hand in hand with the concentration of economic activities in agglomerations, marginalization or abandonment of economically unproductive areas has also taken place. According to Christian Körner of the University of Basel, one third, and especially the “upper third,” of Switzerland’s land surface could be concerned. The consequences of abandonment or inappropriate cultivation of these areas will be increasing evapotranspiration (and less available water, eg for energy production or tourism), infiltration of nitrogen into groundwater, and constraints on agriculture and biodiversity due to expanding forest surface. Important resources and economic sectors such as water supply, energy production, and tourism could be directly affected. This is why well-functioning mountain agriculture is in the interest of the whole of Switzerland.

In conclusion, 2 discrepancies concerning the role of the Alps in Switzerland should be mentioned: one that involves foreign affairs and domestic policy, and one that involves traditional “alpinity” and newly invented urbanity. Rather than cultivating the incompatible ideologies that are the basis for these discrepancies, a way to promote dialogue should be found, also in the interest of mountain populations.

ICAS will engage in such dialogue in future to improve the cohesion between alpine-rural and urbanized areas in Switzerland, by providing and discussing scientific findings related to a national strategy for rural areas in Switzerland.

The year of Rio+20

It will be important to coordinate the different policies that affect sustainable development in the Alps, not only at the national level. Rio+20 is a unique opportunity for the whole Alpine Convention area to present its achievements and renew its commitment to pursue sustainable mountain development at the global level on the basis of the Convention’s principles, as well as to intensify exchange of experience with other mountain regions. In addition, it presents an opportunity to inform a large audience about renewed targets for implementing the Alpine Convention (eg through the results of the activities of the Working Groups, Platforms, and transnational organizations and networks) in the coming decades. Even if Rio+20 gives no special attention to mountain issues, it will still be important to seize this occasion to renew the commitment to sustainable development.

FURTHER READING

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Link 2: ICIMOD [International Centre for Integrated Mountain Development], [UNEP] United Nations Environment Programme. 2011. *Kathmandu Declaration on Green Economy and Sustainable Mountain Development*. 7 September 2011, Kathmandu, Nepal: <http://www.icimod.org/?q=4299>; accessed in January 2012.

Link 3: Mountain Partnership. 2011. *Mountains for the World: Call for Action [Lucerne Call for Action, 12 October 2011]*: http://www.mtnforum.org/sites/default/files/mountains_of_the_world_call_for_action.pdf; accessed in January 2012.

Link 4: Price MF, Borowski D, Macleod C, Rudaz G, Debarbieux B. 2011. *From Rio 1992 to 2012 and beyond: 20 years of Sustainable Mountain Development—What have we learnt and where should we go?* Bern, Switzerland: Alpine Convention and ARE [Swiss Federal Office for Spatial

Environment]. <http://www.alpconv.org/NR/rdonlyres/065F86E6-0CD1-456C-87B0-2848B91A8CC2/0/AlpsreportforSwitzerlandfinal091111.pdf>; accessed in January 2012.

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Link 6: Alpine Convention. 1995. *Framework Convention*. http://www.alpconv.org/theconvention/index_en.htm

Link 7: ICAS [Interacademic Commission for Alpine Studies]. 2011. *Institutional Framework for Mountain Research and Development in Switzerland: Mind Map 1991–2011*: http://icas.akademien-schweiz.ch/downloads/Mindmap_91-2011_web_000.pdf; accessed in January 2012.

Link 8: ICAS [Interacademic Commission for Alpine Studies]. 2011. *ICAS Symposium: “Polarised Alps?” 10 October 2011* [documents in German]. <http://icas.akademien-schweiz.ch/d/aktuelles/tagung/luzern/>; accessed in January 2012.

AUTHOR

Thomas Scheurer^{1*} and Silvia Jost²

* Corresponding author:

thomas.scheurer@scnat.ch

¹ Interacademic Commission for Alpine Studies (ICAS), Swiss Academies of Sciences, Schwarztörstrasse 9, 3007 Bern, Switzerland

² Swiss Federal Office for Spatial Development, Presidency of the Alpine Convention 2011–2012, 3003 Bern, Switzerland

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