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Is “Culture” Still Relevant to Regional Policy?

Conclusions from DIAMONT, a European Union Research Project



The Alps, in the heart of Europe, are obviously an asset, but they also pose a serious challenge: some Alpine regions lag quite far behind economically, mainly because of the disadvantages of location. At the same time, their fragile ecological and cultural systems suffer from the unbalanced economic exploitation inherent in the “open access” policy formulated by the European Union’s (EU) Lisbon Strategy. The Alpine Convention, a transnational treaty signed by all Alpine countries, is designed to guide progress in a sustainable way. Regional policy is a key tool for achieving this ambitious goal—a field of action to foster progress in

a comprehensive way. Regional policy programs are run by all Alpine countries under the umbrella of the EU Cohesion Policy. In this context, the EU research project known as DIAMONT was designed to gain experience with benchmarking tools to support the Alpine Convention’s efforts to monitor sustainable development. One research module focused on the question of the extent to which cultural factors still have an impact on regional policy and development at large. The results of this research are presented here, with a discussion of the influence of cultural factors, values, and attitudes about regional development.

European policy: a challenge for mountain areas

The general road map for Alpine regional development defined by the European Cohesion Policy and strongly oriented towards the Lisbon Strategy assigns the highest priority to “improving the competitiveness and attractiveness of the Alpine space.” This requires achieving the following objectives:

- Positioning the Alpine space as a competitive region;
- Supporting the development of networks and clusters;
- Strengthening the innovative capacities of SMEs (small and medium enterprises);
- Strengthening urban areas as engines of sustainable growth.

This is a very ambitious general modernizing program for the Alps, leaving little room for Alp-specific orientations or a shift of priorities towards regional identities and environmental values. However, such modifications should be mandatory, given the conclusions of the environmental assessment of EU goal-setting priorities, as reported by the Alpine Space II Programme, which clearly showed the medium to high negative impacts of these goals. Thus, if the Alpine Convention and its pledge of sustainability is to be more than a symbolic declaration and is to gain truly decisive standing in development policy, some corrections in the road map would appear to be indispensable.

European policy and the Alps

- **Lisbon Strategy:** adopted in March 2000; aims to make the EU the leading global player and most dynamic and competitive economy by 2010; involves many policy areas, primarily innovation and job creation. (ec.europa.eu/lisbon_strategy/)
- **European Cohesion Policy:** aims to minimize economic and social disparities between EU member states and their regions; key element: the European Structural Funds (ESF, ERDF, EAGGF). (www.ec.europa.eu/regional_policy/index_en.htm)
- **Alpine Convention (AC):** transnational treaty involving 8 Alpine countries; focus on sustainable development of the Alpine space; signed 1991–1993. (www.convenzionedellealpi.org/index.htm)
- **Alpine Space Programme:** transnational EU cooperation program aiming to establish the Alpine space as a powerful area in the European network of development regions. (www.alpinespace.org)

The DIAMONT research project

Hypotheses and basic terms

One module of the EU research project known as DIAMONT (Data Infrastructure for the Alps—Mountain Oriented Networks Technology) addressed the issue of the relevance of culture to regional development in the Alps. Research was based on the following hypothesis: cultural differences, while still present, are losing their previous importance as a driving force in regional development, giving way

to more market-oriented, globally unified regional patterns of strategic importance, while the role of culture is more apparent at the local level, in the details of everyday life, where the influence of globalization may not yet be too determinant.

The basic terms “culture” and “regional development” are very fuzzy constructs and complex scientific concepts; this is also true for “sustainability.” For the purposes of the DIAMONT project, the first two terms were defined as follows.

Culture is a very broad concept, encompassing both action and structure. Culture means the attitudes, visions, and behavior of humans, social groups, regional populations, and even nations in dealing with life, shaping their environment,

and making sense of their existence. But culture also means the results of such actions, manifested in artifacts, institutions, economic structures, settlements, land use patterns, etc. Such structures, attitudes, and traditions are reciprocally interrelated; they may reinforce or dissolve each other. Culture evolves as part of a dynamic system.

All cultures are related to people (as actors) and to place (as the locations of structures such as settlements or landscapes). Consequently, it is common to identify different cultures metaphorically in terms of people and places, ie “French culture” or “Tyrolean culture.” In this manner, it is tempting to set up an equation of the form <region = people = cul-

FIGURE 1 Cyta, a new shopping and entertainment facility in the Inn valley near Innsbruck, Austria. Rapidly growing urban settlements in the Alps are capable of meeting the challenges of globalization, but are losing their traditional uniqueness. The environmental and socio-cultural impacts of this development need to be carefully considered. (Photo by Axel Borsdorf, courtesy of EURAC)



ture>, much like the 17th century rule *cuius regio, eius religio* (the sovereign sets the standards). But how homogeneous are such constructs, especially in the context of modernizing, multi-optional societies? The political (or governance) dimension of this general question is evoked below.

Given this broad understanding of the term, how can cultures be observed, measured, and compared? Operational dimensions of culture could include language, settlement structures, land use, traditions, production/reproduction systems, administrative practices and fiscal regulations, religion, etc. Some might be decisive in one case, and completely irrelevant in others. Therefore, from a methodological point of view, we looked for key factors: what really makes a difference in regional development?

Regional development is a construct as broad and fuzzy as culture. We understand *regions* as territories between the communal and the national level. *Regional development* is considered to be the result of a set of private activities, structural restrictions and opportunities, and public (collective) decisions; the cultural context provides a general background for these processes, but without a clearly defined or traceable causality. Accordingly, the relevant private activities are of 2 kinds: economic processes (production, consumption, investments) and socio-cultural attitudes and processes, the latter being the basis for formal public decisions, which, in turn, influence (support or constrain) private economic activities.

It follows that cultural differences influence regional development (only) in indirect ways, mainly via the implementation of **regional policy**, understood here as a set of goals and measures determined by national or regional authorities to influence regional development in desirable directions. Other sources of influence are less important today because of changes in economic attitudes: economic behavior and decisions are gradually being streamlined towards a uniform, competitive attitude with only short-term perspectives; as a result, settlement structures and agriculture are losing their regional uniqueness (Figure 1).

Common goals for European regional policies are to enhance the competitiveness of regions, and to correct setbacks and regional imbalances. However, regional policies may also be very open to cultural differences: the scope and goals of regional policies, the way public decisions are taken and public funds are allocated, the specificities of legislation and administrative procedures, and general socio-political conditions (especially the interrelations between civil society and formal state authority structures and bodies) may make a difference. Depending on the relative weight of such regional policy measures, and the efficiency of their implementation, they may have a decisive influence on regional development.

The research approach: expert assessments

The **research design** was set up as follows: regional policy was identified as the key research objective, because it was considered to be the link between culture and regional development, and the main driver designed to influence market conditions. Thus, any (cultural) differences in regional development could best be traced by looking at how regional policy was handled. This was done using a well-structured questionnaire, which all project teams in 6 AC countries (France [F], Germany [D], Austria [A], Switzerland [CH], Italy [I], and Slovenia [SLO]) worked on with key experts (academics as well as regional managers and NGO officials).

The impact of culture: tradition or transformation?

The research teams in the different AC countries reported on the impact of cultural factors on regional development and assessed future trends. They were invited to mention whatever cultural traits they judged relevant, and to give a qualitative interpretation of their importance.

Regarding traditional cultural factors (Figure 2) such as language, presence of minorities, and presence of indigenous cultures and traditional value systems, the predominant Alpine-wide trend is decreasing influence, related to accelerating processes of transformation. Conversely,

the presence of local projects and networks, and modernization efforts in general (such as urbanization), were judged to be of increasing influence. However, it was not possible to clarify sufficiently in what sense the different factors may influence regional development: ie, slowing down or speeding up modernization. Is preserving traditional structures a positive contribution to sustainability or a handicap to badly needed reforms?

Looking at economic attitudes (Figure 3), there was unanimity about the validity of the mainstream economic paradigm. Alpine regions are clearly regarded as part of the national, if not global economic system, and the keys to development are competitiveness, productivity, innovation, and networking. The experts did not mention the “price” of such transformations in terms of losing traditional values, landscapes, and other assets; nor did they question whether this strategy could really be successful for disadvantaged, not so well-endowed regions too; nor what would happen in regions unable to keep pace with such competition.

On the other hand, regarding environmental and social values (Figure 4), the survey showed much greater complexity. It was determined that education and public services are increasingly important in regional development. But with regard to the future, experts disagreed about the extent to which regional policies should be mandated to ensure such services, or whether they should be left to the private sector at the risk of inadequate or costly supply. Even more disputed was the trend with respect to the importance of the traditional value of cultural identities and minority rights in regional development: will their significance grow or diminish? Both assessments were expressed in the survey, based on the argument either that traditions and minority rights were valuable in a globalizing world rapidly losing regional diversity, or, on the contrary, that they were becoming obsolete, by the same token.

It is obvious that these trends—economic and socio-cultural transformations—are 2 sides of the same coin. It is interesting to see 2 opposite modes for handling these transformation processes. One still

FIGURE 2 The importance of cultural factors. Entries indicate the experts' opinions regarding the future of each country, while arrows show the overall trend from present to future. Countries are referred to by their international abbreviations.

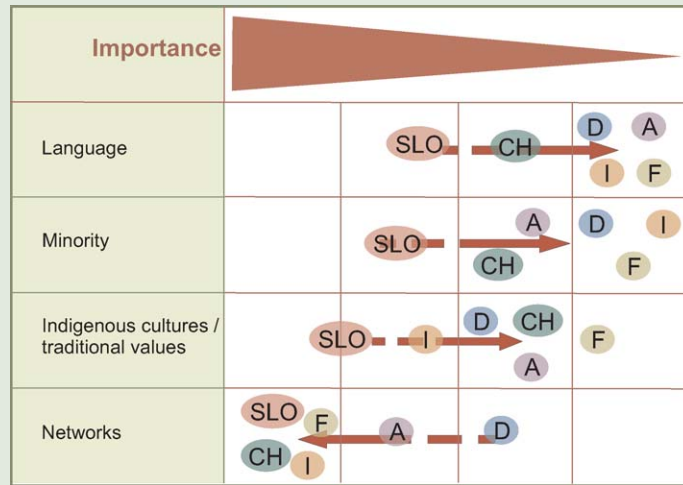


FIGURE 3 The importance of economic attitudes. Entries indicate the experts' opinions regarding the future of each country, while arrows show the overall trend from present to future. Countries are referred to by their international abbreviations.

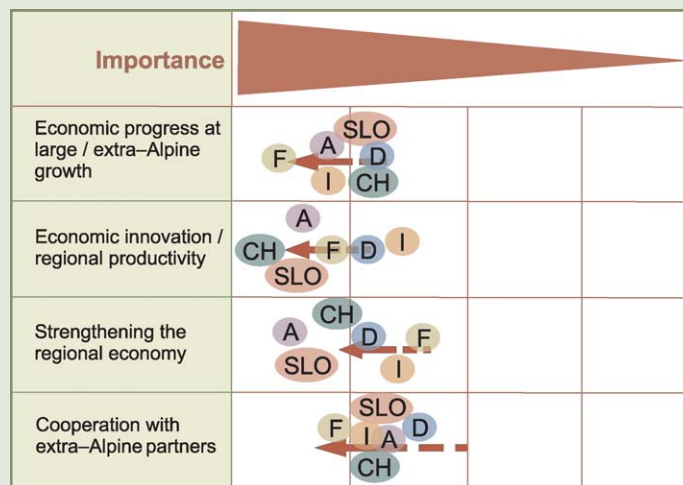


FIGURE 4 The importance of environmental and social attitudes. Entries indicate the experts' opinions regarding the future of each country, while arrows show the overall trend from present to future. Countries are referred to by their international abbreviations.

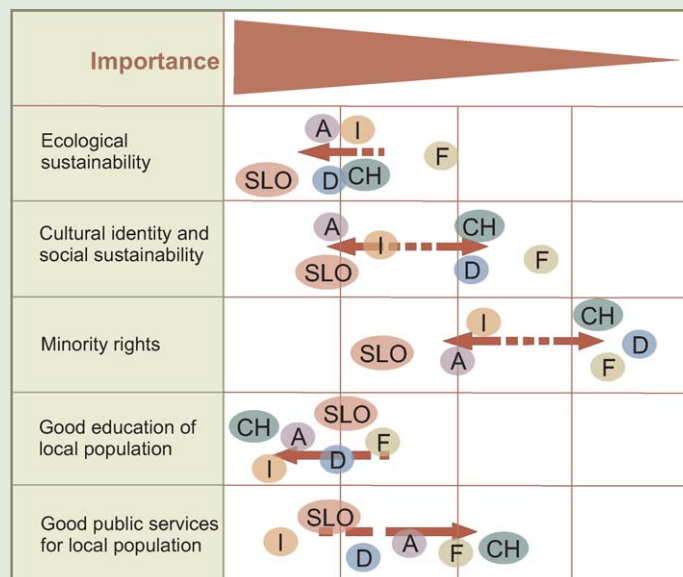


TABLE 1 Objectives and trends of regional policy within European countries. Countries are referred to by their international abbreviations.

Alpine Convention countries Objectives and trends of regional policy	A	F	D	I	SLO	CH
Diminishing disparities; equitable living conditions	×	×	×	×	×	×
Stopping or retarding outmigration		×		(×)	×	×
Strengthening urban centers for European and global competition	×	×	×	×	×	×
Improving rural areas by providing infrastructure	×	×		(×)	×	×
Protecting nature, cultural landscapes, the environment	×	×	×		×	×
Sustainable development; prudent use of resources; maintaining a balance between development and protection		×	×		×	
Improving public–private partnerships; improving “soft” factors		×	×	×	×	×
Improving coordination, integrated planning and development	×				×	×

links regional development to traditional cultural values tied to territories and the people living there, and still attributes to these traditions a considerable (although diminishing) influence. The other view is that regional development (and policies supporting it) depends increasingly on the urbanization profile and the socioeconomic potential of a given location, which is rather independent of cultural factors, and thereby generates completely new geometries of progress that may or may not coincide with traditional structures. It remains to be seen whether these modes can lead to different action plans with different outcomes in terms of regional development, or whether they are just differences in perception and intentions with no significant impact.

Regional policy analysis: convergence of approaches

In all AC countries, regional policy has a more or less extended tradition, based on general political and administrative structures, and on specific perceptions of the Alps and their resources, potentials, and problems. However, new challenges such as scarcity of public funds or the pressure to open up agro-markets call for adapta-

tion. An evaluation of regional policy should thus provide insight into institutional differences. Therefore, strategies, tools, and implementing institutions were scrutinized; we found 2 groups of characteristics, one with a common (generalized) approach in all countries, and the other with quite distinct differences between AC countries.

There was consent about the growing influence of EU policies and provisions, a shift towards regional governance (either up from communal level, or down from national level), common goals such as reducing disparities or strengthening Alpine urban centers to increase their competitiveness, and tools such as master plans or development schemes, but with limited enforcement power (Table 1).

On the other hand, there are 3 main dimensions of difference between country-specific approaches to regional policy; these are partly rooted in political and administrative history:

- Top-down vs bottom-up
- Sectoral vs integrative
- Public vs private

As far as the first 2 are concerned, there are strong tendencies in most AC countries

TABLE 2 Strategic approaches to regional policy within European countries. Countries are referred to by their international abbreviations.

Alpine Convention countries	A	F	D	I	SLO	CH
Strategic approaches to regional policy						
Bottom-up (federalized or decentralized) implementation	×		×			×
Top-down (centralized) implementation		×	(×)	×	×	
Specific Alpine perspective	×		×			×
Alps perceived as marginal spaces		×	×	×		
Influence of EU policies and provisions	×	×	×	×	×	(×)
Trend towards regional competence	×	×	×	×	×	×
→ down from national level		×		×	×	
→ up from communal level	×		×		×	×

to combine tradition with recent experience, leading to mixed approaches (Table 2). Thus in countries with mainly top-down procedures and implementation schemes (F, I, SLO), there are, for example, newly developed councils at local/regional levels as well as increasing authority among local governments to draw on their knowledge base and expertise and to improve acceptance among the local population. In the countries with mainly bottom-up approaches (A, D, CH), efforts to coordinate these approaches at higher levels of governance have increased. The same phenomena can be observed for the sectoral-integrative gap: quite efficient (“technocratic”) sectoral approaches are being combined with coordinating tools, whereas comprehensive (but not very operational) schemes are being strengthened by more effective implementation tools.

Regarding the “public/administrative sector vs private sector/civil society” dimension, country-specific difference are less pronounced. Most institutions in charge of regional policy and promotion of regional development are administrative (governmental) entities. However, to some extent private institutions are also involved, eg agencies, chambers of commerce, and even NGOs; there are now considerable efforts to develop more public–private partnership schemes, eg in the form of councils. Moreover, there is a trend towards greater influence for civil society as its stakeholders involved in regional policy are increasing in number and competence. This is especially true where “sustainability” is at stake: private

institutions quite often have clearer visions and a better grasp of this field of action than traditional administrative bodies.

Conclusions and outlook

In all Alpine countries there are general and common endeavors (with differences in detail) to reduce regional socioeconomic disparities by improving economic competitiveness; general socioeconomic factors such as innovation and productivity are increasingly relevant in regional policy. There is also a common tendency towards an enhanced focus on regional strengths and potentials (Figure 5). Also common is the pledge of “sustainable development,” along with efforts to increase the impact of participatory and integrative processes, and to find an optimal mix of bottom-up and top-down oriented decision-making in regional policy. The rationale behind the trend towards convergence is obvious: facing common challenges at a rapid pace means that regional policy responses (in goals and means) will gradually follow a pattern of best practices.

On the other hand, looking closer at the institutional aspects of regional policy, we come across some major differences among the Alpine countries: although most often governmental entities or agencies are in charge of implementing regional policy, there are quite marked differences regarding which levels of government are responsible for such measures. Also, in spite of a general tendency to increase the involvement of civil society,

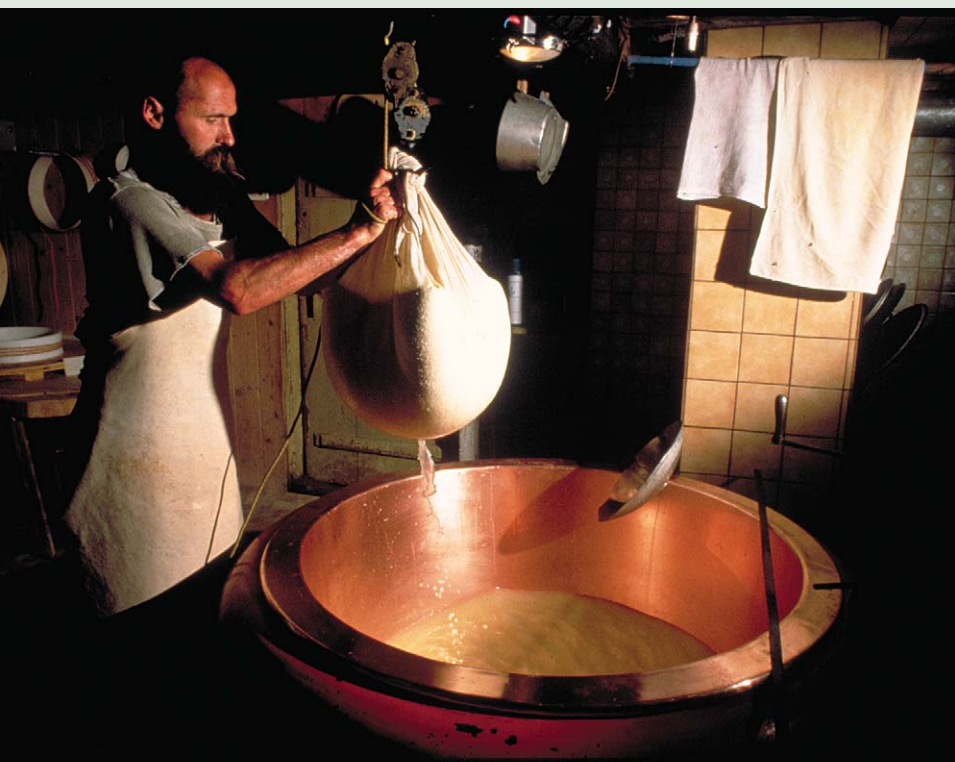


FIGURE 5 Traditional cheese-making in Kleinwalsertal, Austria. Alpine countries tend to focus on regional strengths (often based on centuries-old traditions) and economic competitiveness—for example by adapting niche products to the global market. (Photo courtesy of Kleinwalsertal Tourismus)

there are relevant differences regarding the degree of participation and the involvement of private partnerships. However, it may well be that the resources available and the efficiency of their deployment will prove to be more important than institutional differences as such.

We conclude that the traditional influence of cultural factors on regional development in Alpine countries seems to be decreasing (while still intuitively present in our perception), leaving an open trail to generalized development, which generates peaks and valleys more as a result of globally determined qualities of location (such as easy access and urbanization, ie along the village–metropolis gradient) than from local or regional culture, which in itself tends to become more uniform.

Traditional cultural differences, then, are more an expression of time lags and bound to diminish in the long run. This in turn is a clear signal for AC politics: to monitor regional development in the Alpine Convention context, we must not spend too much effort on indicators based on traditional cultural differences, but more on indicators measuring sustainable progress in a globalizing world. However, this may well include information on regional identity, provided it means not mere folklore or leftovers from the past, but a conscious profile and strategy for future challenges. Such modifications of the general path of development according to the Lisbon Strategy would really be essential, a landmark of “good governance” for Alpine regions, in the true sense of sustainability, and would perfectly match the Alpine Convention pledge.

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