

Why the Alps matter



The Alps are a coherent mountain region covering 190,568 km² across eight countries, with a population of 14 million. Their central location in western Europe gives them many important roles for the continent. The Alpine economy is based on a symbiosis of diverse sectors: tourism, services, industry, electricity generation, and agriculture. The territory is highly heterogeneous and polarised, with great disparities – especially in terms of population, unemployment, economic density and GDP.

How the Alps contribute to sustainable development

The Alps have long been a habitat for human settlement. They have a rich heritage of various cultures, traditions, know-how and economic activities and offer many resources for their inhabitants. They also have an economic role at a wider scale, providing goods and services – such as water, hydroelectricity, agricultural goods, handicrafts, and recreation – for all of Europe, as well as being a hotspot of biodiversity, with many endemic species. The Alps are also a dynamic region in the field of innovation. To cope with various challenges and threats, Alpine communities and governments have been valorising local expertise and networks of competence, and regional centres of competence have been very active in fostering development and creativity.

A long history of institutional frameworks, governance mechanisms and policy instruments relating to sustainable mountain development in the Alps preceded the publication of Agenda 21 in 1992. There is also a well-established tradition of inter-regional and cross-border cooperation and the use of legislation to address specific Alpine challenges. Following Rio 1992, many initiatives for sustainable mountain development were developed and implemented across the Alps.

The Alps have been the first mountain range to benefit from an international legally binding instrument for a mountainous area, the Alpine Convention. In its 20 years of activity, this treaty for the sustainable development of the Alps developed a rich governance toolbox based on transboundary cooperation, partnerships and networks. This allows a stronger vertical and horizontal involvement of stakeholders ranging from political decision-makers to NGOs and civil society actors from different areas, so that emerging issues may be better tackled at their specific functional level.

Despite the progress made towards sustainability, the Alps remain under strong pressure. From a perspective within the Alps, changes in population patterns due to ageing, migration and brain drain, territorial polarization and the decline of peripheries, as well as a weakening of social cohesion represent threats for the socio-economic prosperity of the Alps and the well-being of their populations. From a wider point of view, various developments, such as climate change, international economic competition, Alpine transit traffic, decreasing biodiversity and land consumption threaten the ability of the Alps to provide the goods and services mentioned above.

The heterogeneity of Alpine situations and the complexity of those challenges require territorially-adapted solutions; sustainable development may be the goal, but the means towards it are diverse.



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Policy action for the Alps – and the future we want



Political agendas must respond to the complexity, role and interdependencies of Alpine activities. The key need is for place-based policies, integrating different sectors from a functional perspective in a multi-level and multi-stakeholder implementation framework. Comprehensive solutions must cross institutional and national borders.

Climate change

Climate change adaptation should include a new culture of risk with regard to natural hazards, reinventing Alpine tourism, and new nature protection strategies. The Alps can contribute to mitigation in unlocking their potential for producing renewable energies and for energy efficiency through traditional knowledge and the use of natural resources in construction.

Management of natural and human resources

Policy actions should foster the wise use of Alpine assets:

- implementation of sustainable water management, considering the various needs for energy, agricultural, industrial, tourist and domestic uses.
- control of urbanisation by limiting multi-location living and second home construction, support of the shift of transit traffic from road to rail.
- promotion of compensation mechanisms by users of Alpine resources and ecosystem services, establishment of connectivity networks to enhance biodiversity.
- provision of services of general interest, stimulation of job opportunities.

Governance and innovation towards a green economy

Technical innovation and added-value production are possible in the Alps. Innovation and investment should be oriented towards a green economy, notably in the fields of environmentally-friendly tourism, protected areas, agricultural policies, income diversification, and renewable energies. Governance based on Alpine competencies and reflecting the different levels of action and knowledge implies the need for both bottom-up initiatives and national, international and trans-national institutions.

Cooperation and functional relationships

As the Alpine states share a common territory and assets (natural resources, knowledge, social capital, networks, etc.), they must implement efficient territorial cooperation at all scales. The focus should increasingly be put on fostering functional relationships between all relevant actors (agreements, territorial entities, NGOs, research institutes, regional centres of competence).

The greatest challenge for the Alps is to preserve the quality of the environment while ensuring the promotion of competitive economic development and the ability to provide goods and services both internally and externally. This requires a fine balance between exogenous and endogenous aspirations about the Alpine territory.

