

SUSTAINABLE SPATIAL DEVELOPMENT IN THE ALPS

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1 Introduction

This special issue of *Acta geographica Slovenica* discusses selected topics in spatial development in the Alps from the perspective of spatial planning legislation, stakeholder engagement in spatial planning decisions, tools that enable the effective flow of expertise and exchange of instruments, and best practices across the Alps, as well as from the economic perspective using the example of Alpine regions' reaction to the economic crisis that affected Europe and the rest of the world at the end of the past decade. By including articles written as part of the WIKIAlps project, which was financed through the EU transnational cooperation program Alpine Space, this special issue seeks to invigorate discussions on sustainable spatial development in the Alps and thus contributes to a greater familiarity with this issue and to more prudent decisions.

2 The articles

In their article »Transnational Needs of Sustainable Spatial Development in the Alps: Results from an Analysis of Policy Documents,« Marzelli and Lintzmeyer present the international needs of Alpine spatial development, analyzing thirty-two documents (i.e., spatial development strategies, plans, and reports) at the transnational, binational, and national levels. Their research includes a quantitative analysis of keywords, in which they draw attention to their interconnections and overlaps, and define the transnational character of individual categories from the viewpoint of how frequently individual topics occur. Their analysis continues by assessing the added value of the documents studied, the obstacles that limit their implementation, and the stakeholders the documents refer to. The results of the analysis show a need for international coordination of individual policies in formulating strategies and governance processes, managing natural resources, and creating an adequate knowledge base to facilitate international decision-making.

Stakeholder engagement in the planning process is one of the increasingly frequently expressed assumptions of sustainable spatial development. In their article »Achieving Sustainable Spatial Development in the Alps through Participatory Planning,« Nared et al. examine spatial planning legislation in seven Alpine countries and analyze how individual stakeholders engage in spatial planning processes. The authors present the planning systems applied in the countries studied and use twenty-seven pieces of legislation to establish that the participatory process is slowly growing in importance, even though it continues to lag behind expectations; it is often viewed as a necessary evil, while at the same time many otherwise interested groups have inadequate expertise and skills to actively participate in the planning process. In this regard, they highlight the need for more active use of the participatory process in formulating documents and the need to train planners in participatory methods and techniques.

Engaging actors at the local and regional levels is relatively simple, whereas within a wider context, such as international challenges like spatial development in the Alps, the participatory process is made difficult due to large spatial distances and language barriers. In this connection, various online tools have recently become commonplace. They use new information and communication technologies to make it possible for all interested parties to become involved in discussions and shaping policies, using a bottom-up approach. In their article »Web-Based Instruments for Strengthening Sustainable Regional Development in the Alps,« Borsdorf, Bender, Braun, and Haller analyze the application of web 2.0 technologies and present the key results of various projects from this field (e.g., GALPIS, DIAMONT, mountain.TRIP, and WIKIAlps). They highlight the fact that, in addition to a general discussion, these types of tools also enable the participation of the general public, not only in the role of passive observers, but also as active joint shapers of spatial planning and development policies.

The last article on sustainable spatial development in the Alps (Brozzi et al. 2015) focuses on the broader developmental aspect of Alpine regions, examining how the NUTS2 and NUTS3 regions covered in the Alpine Space program responded to the economic crisis that affected Europe after 2007. The authors' main attention is directed to regional resilience, examining the reasons for the various reactions of regions in different social, economic, and spatial circumstances, based on which the crisis affects some more and others less. To illustrate the effects of the crisis, the authors compare indicators from before and after the crisis. Their findings show differences between the three groups of regions studied as well as at the national level, which is reflected in a poorer response of individual Italian and Slovenian regions, or a greater impact on these regions.

3 Conclusion

The realization that spatial development in the Alps is an extremely complex process is the common denominator of the contributions in this special issue of *Acta geographica Slovenica*. It is connected with a broad range of institutions at various levels, starting with eight Alpine countries on the one hand and many local communities and inhabitants on the other. Dividing the responsibilities between territorial units and sectors when dealing with shared challenges also calls for joint approaches in overcoming these challenges. From this perspective, it is necessary to have good knowledge of spatial processes, differences in spatial planning legislation, and the principles of engaging the relevant stakeholders in the decision-making processes. In addition, it is also vital to seek new forms of cooperation, such as a shared knowledge base like the WIKIAlps online encyclopedia and other comparable information platforms. The goal is to transcend boundaries and overcome bureaucratic obstacles, and to build on the shared potential and wealth of knowledge that people living in the Alps have acquired through life experience.

