



EUROMONTANA

Rethinking territorial balances between urban and rural areas in the European Mountains: how can innovation support win-win solutions?

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- [stakeholder presentations](#)
- [pictures](#) of the conference

OPENING



Juanan Gutierrez, President of Euromontana, opened the conference by recalling the spirit of innovation of European mountains. Beyond the fantasized vision of mountains, the President of Euromontana evoked how crucial it is to develop an **integrated approach of innovation for the development of mountain territories**. He also stressed the importance not only of **technological and digital innovation but also of social innovation** and new innovative models of organisation and governance. Some constraints in mountain areas, such as the reduced training and education opportunities, the remoteness of companies and the recurrent border position of European mountains, require highly adapted approaches at micro-territorial level to bring about innovation in mountain areas.

SESSION 1: How can innovation encourage win-win partnerships between urban and rural areas in the mountains? Practical Examples

The first session of the event showcased concrete examples (related to social innovation, a higher education model, rural innovation systems and a large urban metropolis) from practitioners to first understand the concrete achievements in terms of innovation and urban-rural partnerships.

Manfred Perlik, Geographer, at the Centre for Development and Environment of the University of Bern, highlighted the role of social innovation in mountain areas in the global context of urbanization. **With economic activities starting to concentrate around urban centres in the 1970s, mountain regions have been experiencing a progressive decline, particularly since the 1990s,** with a loss of attractiveness and employment - including in key sectors such as agriculture and tourism since the 2000s. Gradually, industries are settling in plains and mountain regions are reduced to resource territories. The risk of territorial division is therefore increasing between "AAA" regions, regions that have "adaptability, attractiveness and authority" and mountain regions that are resource regions - which also face the risk of overexploitation, for example by the extractive and tourist industries. To address these growing territorial gaps, Manfred Perlik presented the Horizon2020 [SIMRA](#) project - on **Social Innovation in Marginalised Rural Areas**. According to SIMRA, social innovation is characterised by the reconfiguration of social practices in response to societal challenges by seeking to improve societal well-being and necessarily involving the engagement of civil society actors. Social innovation **enables new collaborations to be built between and within regions**. Manfred Perlik illustrated his point with the Italian example of migrants' integration into the local trajectory and into the regional economy through their employment by social cooperatives. By developing the [SIMRA case study on the canton of Neuchâtel](#), Switzerland, Manfred Perlik also demonstrated how social innovation can strengthen the links between urban and rural areas in mountain areas and reconcile these territories.



To encourage innovation in mountain areas, Anna Giorgi, Director of UNIMONT, the detached centre of the University of Milan ([UNIMONT](#)), explained how the University of Milan has succeeded in adapting education and research activities to the needs of mountain communities. UNIMONT is a branch of the University of Milan, based in the village of Edolo, with less than 5,000 inhabitants. For 20 years, **UNIMONT has been a bridge between mountain areas and the urban centre of Milan**. This decentralised branch of Milan University includes an applied research and innovation centre and a university degree in sustainable development and resource management (hosting a total of 380 students each year). UNIMONT's activities focus on agriculture and forestry as well as sustainable development and territorial development.

The success of UNIMONT also relies on **maintaining an entrepreneurial and innovative spirit in rural mountain areas since**, as Anna Giorgi explains, most students choose to stay in the Edolo area. In addition to the students on the decentralised campus, UNIMONT is also developing online courses and seminars to extend university knowledge to as many people as possible (more than 36,000 participants since 2012). Despite the difficulty of creating a mountain campus, UNIMONT has overcome the obstacles related to accessibility by opting for a strategy based on the specific needs of mountain areas, through **interaction between researchers, students and local communities, while developing innovative methods to maintain connections with Milan** and to disseminate research beyond the campus. Anna Giorgi stressed that mountain resources must become opportunities and

be taken into account in innovation strategies. UNIMONT's success has been reflected in its designation as leader of EUSALP Action Group 1, to "develop an effective ecosystem for research and innovation".

Danijel Bertovic, Director of PINS - the Regional Development Agency based in Skrad, Croatia - is involved in the Interreg Europe [P-IRIS](#) project, which aims to ensure the transition from triple helix innovation policies to the quadruple helix model in order to improve cooperation in rural innovation systems. For Danijel Bertovic, this project, born within the Euromontana network, helps to improve innovation in rural areas by improving networking activities and encouraging the use of innovative tools and methods. P-IRIS aims to **strengthen local capacities, create an innovative and positive ecosystem for entrepreneurs and increase the attractiveness of rural areas to close the gap with urban territories**. To this end, access to infrastructure such as test areas is essential in rural and mountainous areas, stressed Danijel Bertovic. Rather than opposing urban and rural territories, P-IRIS aims at facilitating win-win cooperation between these regions. This approach can also be interesting in the context of Smart Villages. Among the good practices collected during the project, **coworking spaces in rural areas were identified as solutions to encourage innovation**, enhance know-how in mountain areas and develop an entrepreneurial spirit within a local network. This is the best practice that PINS is currently implementing in Skrad.



Malek Bouhaouala, Lecturer at the Grenoble Alpes University, is conducting a multidisciplinary research project on **innovation within the mountain sports tourism ecosystem in the Auvergne-Rhône-Alpes region**, with the support of Labex Item (Innovation in Mountain Territories research unit). For Malek Bouhaouala, mountain actors are already innovative but this existing **entrepreneurial innovation in mountain areas is no longer enough to make the difference in the international competition**. Globalized competition has shifted from the business-to-business level to the territorialised inter-ecosystem level. Indeed, strategic innovations with high added value are complex enough to be led by a single actor. For Malek Bouhaouala, an ecosystem is not only based on cooperation, but also introduces the idea of competition, which creates a new type of collaboration combining cooperation and competition - a framework in which **interactions between actors promote collaborative innovation with high added value for mountain territories**.



The situation of the Grenoble-Alpes Metropole is quite unique in the sense that it has taken advantage of this regional socio-economic ecosystem specific to tourism and mountain sports in its development strategies. In this territory, the largest mountainous region in France, mountain tourism, including snow sports, accounts for a significant share of regional GDP (8%, or €21 billion of tourism consumption). The region's economy is therefore based on an important natural comparative advantage, the Alps, but also on a world-class ecosystem specialised in mountain tourism and sports, with more than half of the companies located in this region considered as specialised.

In recent years, notes Malek Bouhaouala, the various actors in this ecosystem have understood that **joint work can not only promote innovation** in the sector but also improve the satisfaction of tourists and locals enjoying mountain sports. Companies and managers of supply structures (services and industries) are therefore inevitably led to work with small local companies, French but also European tourism agencies as well as public research organisations, institutions such as the Auvergne-Rhône-Alpes region, the Grenoble-Alpes Metropole, the Cluster Montagne, regional agencies or the

Chambers of Commerce and Industry. The governance of collaborative innovation is changing to include more socio-economic actors who invest in this sector, such as public bodies and companies. While companies in the sector remain focused on their own market, they are increasingly open to interactions with other actors, in particular institutions and researchers. According to Malek Bouhaouala, **these new interactions strengthen the competitiveness of European mountains through collaborative innovation in a globalised and competitive world. Thus, the Grenoble-Alpes Metropole is strengthening the links between mountain areas and cities; companies and populations continue to develop the region both socially and economically.**

SESSION 2: Roundtable: How can innovation be encouraged in the future CAP and Cohesion Policy for more win-win partnerships between urban and rural areas?

The second part of the event gave the floor to representatives of European and regional institutions to discuss how policies can support the implementation of innovative projects.



Erik Gløersen, moderator of this session and Director of Spatial Foresight France, is also coordinator of the [ESPON BRIDGES](#) project, which focuses on territories with specific geographical constraints. In these territories, stressed Erik Gløersen, **the lack of public services makes social innovation a key tool** to meet the needs of local communities and compensate the negative externalities of territories with specific geographical constraints. The Maisons de Services Publics, created in France to put brakes on the disappearance of services of general interest in areas in demographic decline, are an interesting example of top-down social innovation for Erik Gløersen. The Gaalaxy project in South Tyrol, on the other hand, illustrates a bottom-up approach to social innovation, with strong involvement of local communities to improve care for the elderly. **Mountain areas, through their geographical specificities** involving small communities and challenges linked to the lack of infrastructure and services, are therefore for Erik Gløersen **an ideal profile for the emergence of social innovation.**

Francesco Brignone, Delegate of the Lombardy Region for Mountain Development Policies, illustrated policy opportunities by referring to the strategy developed by the Lombardy Region for mountain areas - in particular to maintaining services adapted to local needs. Social innovation is promoted in the region through the use of the European Social Fund and the European Regional Development Fund. With a view to the next programming period, **Priority Objective 5 (PO5) "Europe closer to citizens"** is an opportunity, according to Francesco Brignone. This new PO5 **provides the tools to build strong partnerships with local populations.** Nevertheless, the representative of the Lombardy region stressed the fact that regional authorities will have to demonstrate their ability to adapt their strategies to local needs, whether through bottom-up or top-down approaches.





Jone Fernandez, Director of rural and littoral development and European policies of the Basque Government, stressed the importance of urban-rural linkages in this region where 80% of the territory is mountainous, with important density variations. As in most European regions, Jone Fernandez pointed out that innovation in the Basque Country is concentrated in large cities. During the current programming period, the Basque Government focused on innovation in rural areas, which was the subject of measure 16 (cooperation) of the Basque Rural Development Programme.

Efforts have been made, for example, to **bring farmers and researchers closer together** and encourage **the emergence of innovative agricultural projects**. Social innovation is also an interesting tool for the Basque Country, as recalled by the Government representative. The [NIREA](#) project, for example, aims at **bringing closer people from cities and rural areas**, in particular by consuming local products from mountain areas, recognising the multifunctionality of rural areas and providing training in schools on the importance of the countryside. In response to Benoit Esmanne, from DG AGRI, Jone Fernandez also stressed the need to **build CAP Strategic Plans at regional level** in a country like Spain where rural and agricultural realities differ greatly from one region to another. Finally, reacting on the intervention of Marek Teplansky, DG REGIO, the Basque representative reiterated the request for a **European Rural Agenda, which could ensure a better consideration of rural specificities** and would help to better bridge the gap between urban and rural territories.

Marek Teplansky, Head of Unit of Inclusive Growth, Urban and Territorial Development, DG REGIO, stressed that **convergence between urban and rural areas** is increasingly important due to **their increasing interdependence**. Member states have launched a process to review the EU's Territorial Agenda and Urban Agenda and bridging the gap between these interdependent territories resonates strongly in both agendas. Convergence between urban and rural areas is therefore also reflected at the political level, whether within the European Commission or in Member States. There is an increasing emphasis on the **functionality of regions**, bypassing the administrative borders of regions or countries by adopting, for example, **transregional and cross-border Operational Programmes**. In addition, recalled the representative of DG REGIO, the European Commission introduced policy objective "Europe closer to citizens" in order to emphasize the importance of territorial dimension of the Cohesion policy and empower local communities to the design of strategies adapted to their needs.



Benoit Esmanne, Project Officer of the Unit Conception and Consistency of Rural Development, DG AGRI, drew attention to the proposed new delivery model for the post-2020 Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) which will give Member States more flexibility to define specific tools to meet the particular needs of their rural territories, through National Strategic Plans. He also stressed the increased support for rural SMEs in the next CAP, as well as the obligation to grant a minimum of 5% of the financial envelope to LEADER to enable more innovative partnerships to be built. As for the functionalities of territories, Benoit Esmanne pointed out that DG AGRI is also looking into this concept, in particular by promoting the diversification of agricultural activities in rural areas, such as in France, where farmers renovate part of their buildings with the support of the EAFRD and then rent these rooms on the farm for urban students.

There are many opportunities to strengthen the links between urban and rural areas, but it is necessary to **promote the strengths of rural areas**, such as the production of healthy and quality food,

as well as to **raise awareness in villages about the needs of urban populations** so that farmers can meet new demands. Connecting these populations is, for Benoit Esmanne, the best way to achieve win-win relationships. Finally, he acknowledged the need to smartly combine the various European funds while insisting that **rural and urban areas should not compete for the largest share of the budget but should instead focus on the most efficient use of these funds for their mutual benefits.**



CONCLUSION

To close the conference, Juanan Gutierrez, President of Euromontana, called for **a fair recognition of the different territories in order to overcome the dichotomy between rural and urban areas** and to think in terms of functional spaces and integrated territorial strategies. While the examples presented by the various speakers clearly demonstrated how innovative mountain regions are, the President of Euromontana invited the European Commission **to further promote the use of tools such as ITI and CLLD**, which already exist in the current programming period but are barely used. In this respect, Juanan Gutierrez encouraged Managing Authorities to support the actors on the ground in the implementation of these tools and to use Euromontana's [factsheet](#) on how to better take into **mountain territories in the next programming period.**

With regard to innovation, regions play a central role in the design of local strategies, as demonstrated by the Lombardy and Basque regions, summarised Juanan Gutierrez. However, this calls for vigilance to ensure that **innovation in all its dimensions is not limited to the most connected rural areas** and can emerge even in the most remote mountain areas, for example with the help of the Smart Villages concept. Finally, the President of Euromontana called on the new President of the European Commission, Ursula Van Den Leyen, to consult stakeholders to define a long-term vision for rural areas and to take up our request for **an Agenda for Rural, Mountain and Remote Areas**, as requested by the European Parliament's RUMRA Intergroup and the whole Parliament in its September 2018 resolution.

For further information, please [contact Marie Clotteau](#) – Director of Euromontana