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How does the Cohesion Policy shape mountains?

HOW TO FOSTER THE EFFECTIVE UPTAKE OF COHESION POLICY FUNDS IN MOUNTAIN AREAS?

Highlights from the Montana174's final conference.

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IN A NUTSHELL

On 20th September, Euromontana organised the final conference of the Montana174's project on "How to foster the effective uptake of Cohesion Policy funds in mountain areas?". This document gathers the main messages from EU institutions, political representatives, local stakeholders who took part to the conference.

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SESSION 1: How does the Cohesion Policy shape mountains?

The conference was opened by **Marie-Antoinette Maupertuis**, President of the Regional Assembly of Corsica, who is currently rapporteur on the **Opinion on the Cohesion Policy support for regions with geographic and demographic handicaps** at the EU Committee of the Regions. Ms Maupertuis recalled that mountain areas suffer from geographic constraints which result in higher infrastructure costs and **greater needs of support**. Article 174 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union states that “particular attention shall be paid to [...] mountain regions”. It is complemented by **Article 175** of the TFEU, which specifies that this particular attention should be given not only through the Cohesion Policy but also through all other European policies. Despite the legal obligation established by Article 174, the **8th Cohesion Report** highlighted that **mountain areas still suffer from territorial inequalities**, stressed Ms Maupertuis. For instance, 25% of these areas do not have access to broadband.



In order to better support mountain areas, the rapporteur recommends **improving the programming of funds during the ex-ante phase**, before defining the Operational Programmes of the Cohesion Policy. She also insisted on the crucial need to apply a **rural proofing**, an even a mountain proofing, i.e. a mechanism to review and assess how current and new policies address the needs of rural territories. Likewise, Ms Maupertuis invited the European Commission to ensure that national strategies and Operational Programmes consider the needs of mountain areas and set up **specific indicators**. In particular, she called for using the funds to invest in **basic services** to improve the quality of life of local communities. To conclude, Ms Maupertuis deplored the **lack of earmarking** towards mountain areas and regions of Article 174 in the current programming period and invited the European Commission to fix targets at European level in the post-2027 Cohesion Policy.

Ms Maupertuis' draft opinion "[Enhancing Cohesion Policy support for regions with geographic and demographic handicaps \(art 174 TFEU\)](#)" has been discussed in the EU Committee of the Regions COTER Commission on 29/09/22 and is foreseen to be adopted by the end of this year.

Władysław Ortyl, President of the Podkarpackie Region (Poland) and rapporteur on the Carpathian Macro-regional Strategy at the European Committee of the Regions provided participants with insights of the Cohesion Policy in the Carpathians. Mr Ortyl underlined the **complexity of Cohesion Policy funds** and deplored that, although many possibilities are offered to local governments and communities, **people do not always understand the funds and instruments** available. He therefore highlighted the **crucial need to train local stakeholders and SMEs** on how to apply and use the Cohesion Policy funds.

In order to improve the quality of life of mountain communities and enhance the attractiveness of these areas, Mr Ortyl also called for investments in basic infrastructures, such as sanitation, schools, training and medical centres.

Mr Ortyl stressed the importance of **cross-border initiatives** in mountain areas as a lever of territorial development. As **rapporteur on the Carpathian Macro-regional Strategy** at the EU Committee of the Regions, he therefore called for the creation of a macro-regional strategy for the Carpathian mountains to create more synergies and common investments in the future.

Therefore, the Strategy will be a tool to ensure the cohesion among its all stakeholders.



Ms Ortyl's Opinion "[Macro-regional strategy for the Carpathian region](#)" was adopted by the Committee of the Regions in December 2019.

In 2021, the [Montana174 project](#) collected many examples of projects funded by the Cohesion Policy in mountain areas. **Barbara Cerdan Fortea**, from the Provincial Government of Teruel (Spain) illustrated a few of these examples to participants. She, for instance, presented the [SILVER SMEs](#) project, funded by the Interreg Europe programme, which contributed to boost the development of the Silver Economy in rural and mountainous areas, therefore improving the quality of life of older adults. Ms Cerdan Fortea also mentioned the Interreg Europe project [RAMSAT](#) which helped mountain areas in Europe to develop a sustainable tourism model based on respectful use of natural and cultural heritage. Another good example is the creation of the [pole of the mountain economy](#) in Italy. Financed by the European Social Fund, the pole played an important role in helping young people finding a job in mountain areas by fostering cooperation between schools and companies.

Check the **presentation of Barbara Cerdan Fortea!**

Many more examples are available in the [brochures of good practices](#) produced by Montana174. Examples illustrate funded initiatives in the project's regions but also in Europe's mountains regarding innovation, climate change, tourism, mobility and youth. Some stories are also available in [video!](#)

SESSION 2: What is the uptake of the Cohesion Policy in mountains? What are the barriers?

Wallis Goelen Vandebroek, from the European Commission's DG REGIO, presented to the audience the architecture of the new Cohesion Policy, structured around **5 main priorities**: a Smarter Europe; a Greener, carbon free Europe; a more Connected Europe; a more Social Europe; and a Europe closer to citizens. Ms Goelen Vandebroek underlined the importance of new cross-cutting priority "**a Europe closer to citizens**" to empower local governments and allow locally led development at the NUTS level 3 or below. This objective – Ms Goelen Vandebroek highlighted - can be combined with other policy objectives from the European

Regional Development Fund, Cohesion Fund or European Social Fund to address complex and interlinked territorial needs and potentials. **Two basic minimum requirements** – she added - have been put into place to better support local development: 1. Projects supported by the Cohesion Policy shall be linked to integrated territorial or local strategies, 2. Local interventions shall involve actors/communities. Thus, she encouraged the Member States and regions to make use of this new opportunities, as well as of Community Led Local Development (CLLD) and Integrated Territorial Investment (ITI) tools to address the needs of mountain areas.

Florian Marin, Member of the European Economic and Social Committee and author of several publications on the absorption of Cohesion Policy funds in Romania, gave an overview of main challenges in rural and mountainous areas. He underlined that, by 2022, only 55% of the 2014-2020 funds were used in Romania. Several barriers hinder the uptake of the Cohesion Policy funds in the Romanian mountains. In particular, there is a **lack of expertise and capacities**. Small municipalities have less resources and skills than important urban centre to apply to calls. In addition, Mr Marin stressed the **lack of coherence** between the different Operational Programmes, due to a mono-fund approach, and sometimes even a lack of coherence between calls of the same Operational Programme. Mr Marin stressed that Managing Authorities shall ensure that not only money are absorbed, but also that they are allocated to the right places. As previous speakers, Mr Marin thus **called for more training to improve the skills** of local stakeholders. In addition, he recommended the use of a **multi-fund approach** to ensure better coherence between programmes and favour the use of funds towards targeted goals over the unique goal to deliver on the absorption of funds. He also recalled to the need to integrate the Cohesion Policy's calls into **strategic frameworks**.

Check the **presentation of Florian Marin!**

To complete the discussion on the barriers to the uptake of Cohesion Policy funds, **Klavdija Gornik**, from the Regional Development Agency for Podravje – Maribor, provided an overview of the barriers encountered by more than 350 mountain stakeholders involved by the Montana174's partners during local workshops. Based on the feedbacks of Slovenian mountain actors, Ms Gornik concluded that lack of networking and collaboration hinder their capacity to create strong partnership to uptake the Cohesion Policy funds. For instance, tourism providers face the **lack of cooperation** between tourism providers and local and regional actors such as regional development agencies. On their side, students raised the fact that **not enough publicity** is made around the Cohesion Policy and the funds available. Finally, municipalities and local governments highlighted the incoherence of the forthcoming Operational Programmes in Slovenia, that **do not support a polycentric approach** to development and hence reduce the opportunities for mountain communities to benefit from the Cohesion Policy funds. Overall, Ms Gornik stressed that mountain citizens are deploring the lack of communication and clear information regarding European policies in general, including the Cohesion Policy.

Check the **presentation of Klavdija Gornik!**

ROUND TABLE: What are the main barriers and challenges to the uptake of Cohesion Policy funds in mountain areas?

Speakers' interventions were followed by a round-table to further discuss the challenges related to the uptake of funds. **Adrian-Radu Rey**, Vice President of Euromontana and President of Romontana (Romania) moderated the debate. He underlined the importance of governance for the good uptake of funds. In Romania, 9 mountain massifs were recognised since the adoption of the Mountain Law and dedicated working groups were created; therefore, mountain stakeholders could better cooperate also on the uptake of Cohesion Policy funds. Such statement was shared by **Ms Maupertuis**: in France, despite the national Mountain Law, Corsica has not been recognised as a massif and it is therefore more difficult to make funds convergence towards common goals. To improve the uptake of funds, **Ms Goelen Vandebroek**, from DG REGIO, added that the European Commission will publish in October 2022 a **Handbook on EU Territorial Development** to support practitioners in rural areas to access European funds and use them for integrated territorial development.

SESSION 3: What is the uptake of the Cohesion Policy in mountains? What are the barriers?

After examining the challenges of funds' absorption in the mountains, the conference considered how to encourage their use in the 2021-2027 programming period thanks to some concrete and inspirational examples. For instance, French regions decided to design programmes dedicated to their mountain massifs. **William Biajoux**, from the Auvergne-Rhône-Alpes Region (France), provided participants with an overview of the architecture of funds in the region. The region includes in its Operational Programme an **interregional section entirely dedicated to mountain massifs**. Concretely, this means that some mountains areas located in neighbours' regions are eligible to the programmes offered by Region Auvergne-Rhône-Alpes. Such measure already existed in the 2007-2013 and 2014-2020 Operational Programmes. For interregional mountain programmes, priorities are often related to **tourism, biodiversity**, and the **competitiveness of SMEs** in the wood and wool sectors.

Check the **presentation of William Biajoux!**

Another mechanism to foster the uptake of these funds was set up by the Montana174 project and it built on delivering **targeted communication** towards mountain citizens. As explained by **Daniela Masotti**, Lombardy Regional Agency for Agricultural and Forestry Services (Italy), ERSAF focused on the next generations and created a youth lab to better inform on the possibilities offered by the Cohesion Policy. The "Storytelling for EU youth lab" is the result of an open call for young people from 13 to 23 years old. Under the supervision of tutors, these young people had the opportunity to experience Cohesion Policy on the ground and communicate about it. Methodology is key to build targeted communication, stressed Ms Masotti. Local communities, and in this case young people, must be actors of communication and define messages through their own words. The youth lab experience helped to move from storytelling to "storydoing" and demonstrated that, to understand and communicate about Cohesion Policy, the best methodology is to experience it on the ground.

Check the **presentation of Daniela Masotti!**

To conclude, **Erik Gløersen**, from Spatial Foresight, presented his Outlooks for Targeting Non-standard Geographies in Cohesion Policy. He underlined that regions of Article 174 cover a **wide range of territorial realities**. Thus, these territories have declined the Cohesion Policy investments following different logics. For instance, "outermost regions" mostly focused on a

compensation logic; Northern Sparsely Populated Areas decided to rather focus on knowledge-driven development; and an ERDF criterion was applied to areas with population decline. Mr Gløersen claimed the Cohesion Policy so far struggles to provide solutions to the challenges faced by these territories. Overall, he also underlined that these territories do not only have handicaps to promote but also opportunities, especially when it comes to delivering on the Green Deal. To this end, the Integrated Territorial Investments Tools should better understood in its capacity to support these territories. Mr Gløersen concluded that territories of Article 174 all feature unique specificities and should find their own way to address these challenges without competing for funds.

Check the **presentation of Erik Gløersen!**

ROUND TABLE: Towards replication and upscaling: what recommendations?

Speakers' interventions were followed by a round-table moderated by **Guillaume Corradino**, Director at Euromontana, to further discuss the barriers to the uptake of funds. Several speakers underlined the importance of simplification, both of words and processes. **Daniela Masotti**, from ERSAF, stressed that communication actions, such as those carried out by Montana174, are essential to inform local people and build capacities. **Klavdija Gornik**, from the Regional Development Agency for Podravje – Maribor, shared her wish for more simplification of funds to encourage a better uptake, under the leitmotiv that less is more. In addition, **William Biajoux** added that some loopholes remain in the implementation of the policy – for instance when a mountain territory is composed of different Regions (NUTS 2) with different ERDF funding rates (40% for more developed region and 60% for transition region) which funding rate should apply to fund projects?. Governance was again mentioned a key to success for the efficient uptake of funds in mountain areas. In the Auvergne-Rhône-Alpes Region, the historic mountain massif governance created by the Mountain Law facilitated the cooperation of multiple actors on the same interregional Operational Programme.

Guillaume Corradino concluded the event by underlining that project such as Montana174 enabled to observe on the ground what works in the field of Cohesion Policy but also what are the obstacles to its successful implementation in the mountains. Mr Corradino also welcomed the news tools of the 2020-2027 Cohesion Policy, especially the priority “a Europe closer to its citizens” 5 and its placed-based approach, and called for more communication, exchange of good practices and capacity building to help local stakeholders in using these instruments. Yet, he also invited the European Commission to better consider the needs of regions of Article 174 in the post-2027 Cohesion Policy, based on the relevant recommendations made by Ms Maupertuis in her Opinion, and reaffirmed Euromontana's commitment to play a constructive part in this process.





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