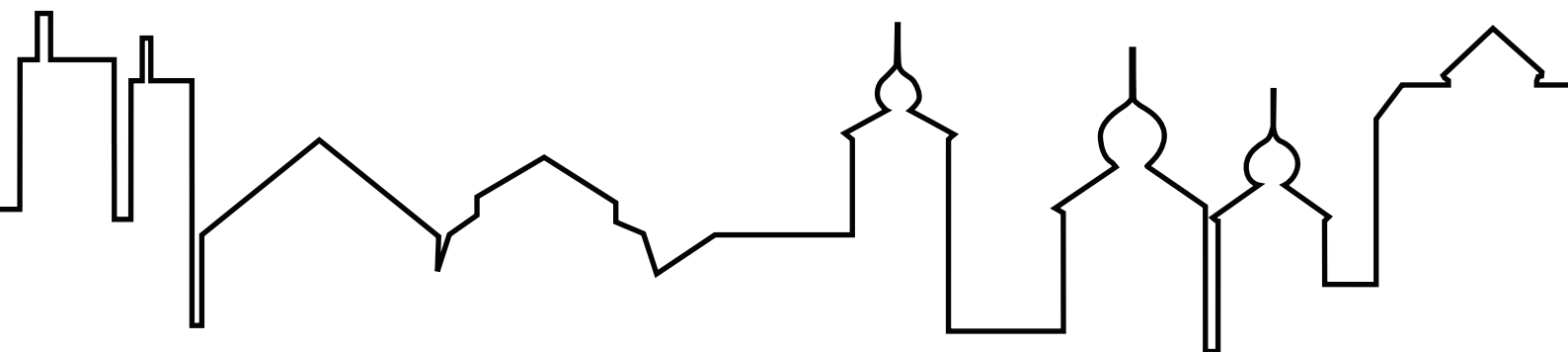


ALPINE TOWNS

Key to sustainable development in the Alpine region

Four Postulates of Sustainable Urban Development



AUTHORS OF THE POSTULATES

Tobias Chilla, Dominik Bertram, Markus Lambracht (Friedrich-Alexander-Universität Erlangen-Nürnberg FAU), Helen Lückge (Climonomics), Marc Pfister (Federal Office for Spatial Development ARE)

CHAIR OF THE WORKING GROUP

Marc Pfister (Federal Office for Spatial Development ARE)

MEMBERS OF THE WORKING GROUP

Austria: Andreas Bartel (Umweltbundesamt Österreich) | Oliver Bender, Valerie Braun (Österreichische Akademie der Wissenschaften)

France: Benoît Fanjeau (Administration régionale de Provence Alpes Côte d'Azur) | Isabelle Paillet (Ministère de la Transition Écologique) | Sylvie Vigneron (Commissariat de massif des Alpes)

Germany: Andra Giehl (StMWi Bayern) | Lukas Kühne (Bundesministerium des Innern, für Bau und Heimat) | Florian Lintzmeyer (ifuplan)

Italy: Michele Munafò (ISPRA) | Andrea Omizzolo, Elisa Ravazzoli (EURAC research)

Liechtenstein: Stefan Hassler, Heike Summer (Liechtensteinische Landesverwaltung)

Monaco: Jessica Astier, Astrid Claudel-Rusin, Julie Davenet (Direction de l'Environnement)

Slovenia: Blanka Bartol, Jernej Črvek, Lenča Humerca Šolar (Ministrstvo za okolje in prostor)

Switzerland: Karin Augsburg, Silvia Jost, Sébastien Rieben (Federal Office for Spatial Development ARE)

European Commission: Andrea Bianchini (DG ENV)

Observer organisations: Magdalena Holzer, Claire Simon (Alpine Town of the Year Association) | Elena Di Bella (Euromontana) | Katharina Gasteiger (Alliance in the Alps) | Wolfgang Pfefferkorn (CIPRA International) | Maarit Ströbele, Bernhard Tschofen (ISCAR)

REPORT COORDINATION

Živa Novljan, Aureliano Piva (Permanent Secretariat of the Alpine Convention)

Cover design: REVITAL Integrative Naturraumplanung GmbH, Austria

Printing: Oberdruck GmbH, Austria

Translation & Proofreading: Intralp, Italy

www.alpinetowns.alpconv.org

© Swiss Presidency of the Alpine Convention 2021/2022



Schweizerische Eidgenossenschaft
Confédération suisse
Confederazione Svizzera
Confederaziun svizra

Swiss Confederation

Federal Office for Spatial Development ARE

Four postulates of sustainable urban development

The ninth Report on the State of the Alps (RSA9) 'Alpine Towns' is addressed to local policy-makers as well as aiming at the international Alpine cooperation. It comments not only on the *state* of Alpine towns but also on the *challenges* and *opportunities* that shape future paths¹. Part 1 of the report provides a significant evidence base for political action. For the application in individual strategies, the thematic priorities and practical options will need to be concretised. To this end, Part 2 of the report offers a series of possible scenarios and solutions.

One overall impression is that Alpine towns have not yet been a very prominent topic in strategic considerations on Alpine development on the transnational scale. Obviously, Alpine towns play a key role for sustainable spatial development: economic prosperity and innovation, good living conditions, effective provision of general services and efficient mobility structures depend very much on Alpine towns.

Alpine towns are also a key for the sustainable development of the whole territory. An efficient spatial organisation is an integral part of fighting climate change and biodiversity loss, while also contributing to general environmental protection efforts. Through strong urban-rural linkages, Alpine towns can act as drivers of socio-economic transformations for larger territories. Taking note of all these functions and developing them further is of crucial importance for sustainable development in the Alps.

The RSA9 shapes new ideas and perspectives on Alpine towns to inspire policy-making from municipal to international levels. We have condensed the findings of the report into *four postulates for Alpine towns*. We believe these four postulates to be fundamental for all places and that they should be the beginning for our change of perspective on the Alps:

1. Alpine towns have key roles beyond size
2. Alpine towns connect urban and rural territories
3. Alpine towns stay front-runners
4. Alpine towns become networking hubs

¹ See the academic discussion of the report in "Part 1: Facts, Maps and Scientific Debates" and the participative developed scenarios on future development paths "Part 2: Five Pictures of the Future".

1. Alpine towns: key roles beyond size

Many Alpine towns are of small size, but they provide essential functions for large regions. They are frequently involved in important global networks, and their reputation – for instance due to their importance for tourism (Sölden, Oberstdorf or Cortina d’Ampezzo), their political role (Davos, Vaduz or Monaco), or as headquarters of enterprises (Reutte, Schaan) – is impressive. It could be said that the number of inhabitants of Alpine towns can be multiplied by a ‘factor ten’ to express their importance in relation to towns outside the Alps. Even if this has not yet been empirically quantified, ‘key roles beyond size’ seems to be an important characteristic of the Alpine context. If one considers that Alpine towns carry similar urban functions as peri-Alpine cities multiple times their size, this has political implications:

- **Build a new understanding.** In the Alps, size itself is not decisive for the significance and for the urban functions of settlements. A small Alpine town most certainly has a greater radiance than the average suburban area. Common (statistical) definitions create a bias that underestimates Alpine urban qualities. A change of perception of this space is needed for future policies, if they are to provide solutions better suited to Alpine challenges and opportunities and unlock the full potential of the settlement system.
- **Support ‘decentralised concentration’.** The polycentric Alpine settlement system is an important asset that should be fostered, with policies that respect this distinctive spatial pattern. Services and amenities should be organised in a ‘decentralised’ way – covering the whole Alpine settlement system – but at the same time efficiently, building on the centrality and regional significance of towns. Policy and funding instruments that set the same development standards for all places, or purely focus on the major Alpine towns, will most certainly be futile. ‘Decentralised concentration’ calls on policy-makers to consider the settlement system as a whole and develop individual urban offers, coordinated over wider areas.

2. Alpine towns: connecting urban and rural territories

Alpine towns link different spaces and connect diverse functionalities. They concentrate population and economic stakeholders and offer a variety of ideas, resources and cultural activities. They interact with Alpine nature and landscapes, but they are also interlinked with larger agglomeration areas. It could be said that they act as ‘brokers’ between rural territories and the main metropolises in and around the Alps. With their specific role in the settlement system, Alpine towns might not only buffer critical processes such as depopulation, economic transformation and environmental degradation, but can also pass on positive effects to the surrounding territories:

- **Multiply effects of transformation.** Through their ‘broker’ role in the settlement system, Alpine towns can become engines of transformation for larger areas. Consequently, policy-makers can make use of this and might enhance the impact of new solutions by promoting them through the settlement system. Model approaches for environmental, social, economic and governance solutions could particularly benefit from such multiplying effects.

- **Create fair spatial structures and networks.** If the transformation of settlements affects much bigger areas, it will be crucial to understand and address the structures and networks they are embedded in. This is particularly true for transitioning zones between different territories, whether they are urban-rural, cross-border or transnational. The challenge is to create a spatial integration that leads to equitable socio-economic outcomes without neglecting ecological needs. Successful strategies for the future rely strongly on capacity building and coordination within entire functional regions to deliver positive effects and to avoid unwanted trade-offs inside the spatial network.

3. Alpine towns: staying front-runners

In many aspects, the Alpine settlement system can build on socio-economic strengths: demographic trends are more positive than in many other European regions. Alpine towns are comparably rich and diverse, with a central position in Europe and unique potentials. Such potentials exist for all towns and settlements, regardless of their size. They need to be carefully and strategically reinforced because Alpine towns will face particular challenges in the future. Towns that simply try to maintain their status quo while ignoring potential tipping points face very uncertain future prospects. Alpine towns will rather need to play a pioneer role in addressing the economic, social, cultural and ecological implications of increased urbanisation. But what are the genuine opportunities for the future?

- **Provide an efficient settlement system.** The Alpine settlement system relies on towns of different sizes, along valleys and corridors as well as in mountainous areas. Supporting this system's complexity contributes to a more equitable organisation of life, an effective energy consumption management and the net-zero land take goal. It allows efficient economic flows and facilitates environmental protection efforts.
- **Channel urbanisation with spatial organisation.** To support the Alpine settlement system, it is necessary to channel urbanisation through efficient spatial organisation. It should halt haphazard expansion yet still deliver services, accessibility and urban qualities to all. An active management of urbanisation calls for special attention to the push and pull effects of mobility networks, economic flows and the influence of metropolitan areas around the Alps.
- **Establish first-mover advantages in times of environmental change.** Within Europe, Alpine towns are more strongly and rapidly exposed to climate change. Climate-proof urban structures will become increasingly important in the Alps to provide a resilient base for life. Finding acceptance for the necessary transitions will require governance structures that reach out to all sectors and to the public. The integrated management of water and energy resources could be seen as testing area for such a governance approach. Early innovation with respect to climate change also brings future economic opportunities, especially in Alpine regions where towns are hubs for specific economic specialisations such as tourism or mountain agriculture.

- **Mind ambivalent potentials.** Two popular responses to counter negative developments in the Alpine settlement system are digitalisation and tourism. Both can create opportunities but come with risks that could disadvantage towns in the long run. While digitalisation will continue and can help with economic diversification, it also might increase dependencies on players outside the Alps and accelerate regional digital divides. Similar outcomes can be observed for high-intensity tourism. However, if managed properly, both can create stabilising effects in combination with other development strategies.

4. Alpine towns: towards networking hubs

Many trends and patterns of the settlement system seem to be attributed mainly to national affiliation. It has a bigger influence on the development path of towns than altitude, distance to metropolises, or appeal as tourist destinations. On the one hand, this situation can sometimes lead to a positive competition of ideas and approaches, referring to the European territorial diversity. On the other hand, the different systems meet in the Alpine region with its many borders, where numerous towns come under pressure by increasing commuter, leisure and retail flows. Currently, the cross-border dimension of Alpine towns is rather neglected and lacks action in a consequent manner. There are very few inner-Alpine networks and links beyond the Alps are skewed towards the metropolises on the Alpine fringe. How can Alpine towns create new opportunities from such a 'collision of ideas' where the different systems develop friction points?

- **Cooperate to redefine spaces.** Alpine towns are part of a complex governance system that spans multiple institutional levels and national systems. On the pan-Alpine level, 'soft' cooperation and communication tools are much more present than binding or 'hard' tools. This is especially true for the numerous cross-border areas where the diverse systems meet. 'Soft' cooperation in functional areas, particularly in combination with public participation approaches, can deliver place-based responses with a high legitimacy and a strong stakeholder backing. Multi-level governance can further support policy-making in such settings.
- **Forge new alliances.** Many of the future challenges and solutions identified are best addressed by yet-to-be-created collaboration networks and alliances. In light of global transformation, strong networks of Alpine towns would offer huge potential to gain recognition as well as political and economic status. Small and medium-sized towns rarely have the same resources and capacities at their disposal as metropolises but, organised in networks, they could enhance their position in politics and for funding at regional and national level and in international networks.

Where to go in the future?

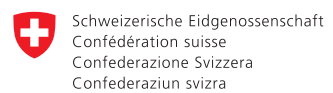
Alpine towns seem to have a similar relevance within their mountainous context as bigger metropolises have for other European territories. The magnitude and implications of this is yet to be explored in further research. The lessons learned will also benefit the spatial understanding of other mountainous or less densely populated areas. Supporting the roles of Alpine towns is a precondition for sustainable development in the Alpine Convention area. It is thus important that policies concerning the Alps look beyond just the size of these settlements and instead take account of their impact. The Alpine Convention should further investigate how to develop these roles in synergy with its sustainable development agenda. The key role of small settlements in the ecological and economic wellbeing of rural territories as well as for a good quality of life should equally be underlined within national and EU policies.

In addition, Alpine towns can be a key to translate economic, ecological and social innovations into larger territories more effectively. This will succeed if towns are embedded in regional networks which collaborate well, include diverse needs and are able to deliver fair solutions to all the stakeholders concerned (urban-rural, cross-border, intra-Alpine town networks). The Alpine Convention might thus consider advancing its work on issues such as biodiversity and climate by involving towns. Alpine towns could strive to be forerunners to pioneer new urban development strategies. Part 2 of the report presents five scenarios with numerous ideas to future-proof urban strategies, improve quality of life and implement urban and regional development projects anywhere in the Alps.

Lastly, improving the transnational cooperation of Alpine towns will strengthen their position in policymaking at all levels, facilitate more efficient links to the urbanised Alpine fringe with its metropolises and improve responses to global transformations. In the future, Alpine towns could further develop their potential through international networks – by using all frameworks available to them (e.g. Alpine Convention, INTERREG Alpine Space Programme, EUSALP, Territorial Agenda 2030, Urban Agenda for the European Union) and by creating new ones.

www.alpinetowns.alpconv.org

© Swiss Presidency of the Alpine Convention 2021/2022



Swiss Confederation

Federal Office for Spatial Development ARE