

The Alpine Convention: an international mountain policy framework

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The alps are divided between eight different countries, but all of them face similar problems in the development of this mountain area. The process of looking at the problems jointly started as early as in 1952, with the establishment of a Commission for the Protection of the Alps (CIPRA). Afterwards, it took four decades until the Environment Ministries of the alpine States and of the European Commission decided to jointly sign an international treaty, the Alpine Convention, on the 7th November 1991 in Salzburg. During many years, CIPRA had prepared the floor for this Convention, by raising awareness at the political level with conceptual contributions and important background studies. Today, it is more and more recognized that this Convention is an important step to receive the political recognition of the particular development issues which these mountain areas face.

Putting the issues on the table

Reflecting on the rapid deterioration of the environmental conditions in the Alps, CIPRA decided in 1987, to prepare the floor for an International Treaty for the protection of the Alps (the Alpine Convention). The strategy was to sensitize and to build an alliance at the level of local and regional Governments.

This bottom-up strategy had limited success, but nevertheless an impact: In 1989, the Governments of the alpine countries and of the European Commission, under the leadership of the German Environment Minister, Klaus Toepfer, embarked on this process, and they finally signed the Alpine Convention in 1991. This treaty became, hereby, a significant and concrete contribution of the alpine states to the Rio Conference on Sustainable Development (1992).

Negotiations at the content level

But despite the several years of preparatory discussions, the text of the convention contained only in its Article 2 a list with objectives which ought to become binding for each of the participating countries through the signing of protocols where the details are specified. The rest of the umbrella Convention was dedicated to specifying rules of collaboration.

What was considered a new and very positive experience was the strong commitment of the governments of all the states in the Alps to look at very different issues and problems (see box) not under a sectorial but under a territorial approach, for the benefit of a mountain region, the Alps. This made the process unique for the participating nations. The process was, however, by no means simple. After the signing of the framework Convention in 1991, it took another 4 years until the document entered into force for the first ratifying countries, and it took another 5 years until it became binding for all of them. Out of the 12 implementation protocols which should be elaborated and signed, only 8 have been drafted so far. They were endorsed in only three of the participating countries in the International Year of the Mountains (2002), this means 11 years after the original framework Convention has been signed. The other countries and the European Union are still to do this step.

From conservation to a sustainable development framework

The overall objective of the Alpine Convention was, from the beginning, to create favourable conditions for a better protection of nature and cultural landscapes and to define, parallelly, a new framework for sustainable development in the Alps, at the basis of criteria of environmental and social feasibility. There was consensus that the standards and norms for environmental protection and development had to be higher than the ones for the surrounding lowland areas.

But, despite clear arguments by its promoters, the convention was at risk to be put at stake. It was argued that the Alpine Convention would be purely a “protection framework”, preventing development in the alps. One of the reasons for this criticism was that information and involvement of the regions and the public in this process had not been received the needed attention from the promoters.

It was positive to see that the participating countries had the capacity to respond with constructive arguments and to learn rapidly. The decision (in 1992), to put more emphasis on the socio-economic aspects and on public involvement, had a very positive impact on the whole process. This experience shows that a top-down process is very unlikely to be a success. In the case of the Alpine Convention, many years were lost because the concerned stakeholders of the regional and local level were not involved. It is extremely important to involve from the beginning regional politicians, communities, NGOs, protected areas and so on.

Positive impacts are already felt

Although the process went on very slowly, although there is no possibilities for sanctions for the parties which do not implement the Convention, and although until 2003 there was no permanent secretariate of the convention, there are positive impacts to be felt. The most significant impact was the establishment of a consensus among politicians and decision makers, that the alps face particular development problems which can only be looked at jointly. Today, numerous information exchange and collaborative networks are well established, and all of them make reference to the Alpine Convention. The two most important ones are the Network of communities "Alliance in the Alps" and the "Network of Alpine Protected Areas".

In general, it was found encouraging that, at the heart of a densely populated continent, the Governments could be brought together at a round table, to carry out, jointly, a problem analysis and to define objectives for the future of their mountain areas. Today, many of the alpine communities are perceiving the Alpine Convention as an opportunity and, very important, as an expression of the strong commitment of the national governments to their often marginalized mountain areas. They know that this kind of solidarity will play more and more a role for the around 6000 communities in the Alps in the future. This positive assessment has replaced earlier criticisms which perceived the Alpine Convention merely as a tutelage from the national Governments.

Box 1: What is CIPRA ?

The International Commission for the Protection of the Alps, CIPRA, was founded in 1952 in Rottach-Egern (Germany), with IUCN as its main promoters. CIPRA is an NGO which comprises, today, more than 100 organizations and institutions, interested in looking at and finding integrated solutions for problems of nature and landscape protection and management, environmental protection and regional planning in the Alps. CIPRA has seven national offices and a regional office in Italy (Tirol).

Box 2: List of Topics in the Alpine Convention

The following topics are addressed in the Alpine Convention, with a territorial and integrated approach: population and culture; spatial development and sustainable development; air quality protection; protection of the soils; water management; protection of nature and conservation of landscapes; mountain agriculture; mountain forests; tourism; transport; energy; and waste management.

Box 3: Direct Benefits for my Municipality

"The Alpine Convention offers fantastic possibilities, beyond any political boundaries, for the collaboration and exchange of experiences about projects with which it is possible to create new jobs. Tourism is one example" (Claude Bumann, community president of Saas Fee, Switzerland).