

Reason

Given the importance of the regional and local levels for successful implementation, the CoR must be involved.

Brussels, 12 February 2003.

*The President
of the Committee of the Regions*
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Report of the Committee of the Regions on ‘Community action for mountain areas’

(2003/C 128/05)

CONTENTS

1. General context
 - 1.1. Definition of mountain areas
 - 1.1.1. Objectives of Directive 75/268/EEC
 - 1.1.2. Council Regulation (EC) No 1257/1999
 - 1.1.3. Own-initiative opinion of the Economic and Social Committee (CES 461/88)
 - 1.1.4. United Nations Environment Programme
 - 1.2. Importance of mountain areas in Europe
 - 1.3. Economic aspects
 - 1.4. Impact of Community and national policies
2. Institutional stances regarding mountain areas
 - 2.1. Convention on the Protection of the Alps
 - 2.2. European Charter of Mountain Regions
 - 2.3. Second Report on Economic and Social Cohesion
 - 2.4. International Year of Mountains
 - 2.5. Chapter 13 of Agenda 21 and the World Summit in Johannesburg
 - 2.6. World Charter of Mountain Populations
3. Legal situation of the EU's mountain areas
4. Mountain regions and the future of Europe
5. Mountains and cities
6. Concluding remarks and proposals

1. General context

1.1. Definition of mountain areas

There are currently a number of different definitions of mountain areas, but none of them is accepted universally and none is applied systematically. Each definition accords particular importance to one (or more) specific aspect(s). Some of these definitions are set out below.

1.1.1. Objectives of Directive 75/268/EEC

Directive 75/268/EEC was designed to reduce the income disparities suffered by farmers in upland and disadvantaged areas. The broad aim of the directive was to compensate farmers for the permanent natural handicaps they face in regions which account for 25 % of the Community's utilised agricultural area (UAA), 15 % of registered farms and 12 % of Community agricultural production. In this way, the directive sought to guarantee the survival and, where possible, modernisation of agricultural activity in these regions.

Diversification of financial incentives under structural policy was proposed as a way of ensuring that structural improvements did not first and foremost benefit the richest and most dynamic regions. In mountain areas, altitude brings difficult climate conditions and a short growing season, while steep slopes make mechanisation difficult. In disadvantaged areas, the land is often poorer and the efforts needed to increase yields can be disproportionate to the results actually achieved.

Hence the long-term survival of agriculture in these areas depends in the final analysis on the perseverance of the farmer. The aid he receives extends beyond the strict confines of agriculture, as it also concerns conservation of the landscape, protection against soil erosion, and the satisfaction of tourism-related needs, as well as helping to keep a sufficient density of population in regions threatened with depopulation.

1.1.2. Council Regulation (EC) No 1257/1999

Article 18 of Council Regulation (EC) No 1257/1999 on support for rural development from the European Agricultural Guidance and Guarantee Fund (EAGGF) offers the following definition of mountain areas:

'1. Mountain areas shall be those characterised by a considerable limitation of the possibilities for using the land and an appreciable increase in the cost of working it due:

- to the existence, because of altitude, of very difficult climate conditions, the effect of which is substantially to shorten the growing season,
- at a lower altitude, to the presence over the greater part of the area in question of slopes too steep for the use of machinery or requiring the use of very expensive special equipment, or
- to a combination of these two factors, where the handicap resulting from each taken separately is less acute but the combination of the two gives rise to an equivalent handicap.

2. Areas north of the 62nd Parallel and certain adjacent areas shall be treated in the same way as mountain areas.'

This regulation replaced Council Regulation (EC) No 950/97 of 20 May 1997 on improving the efficiency of agricultural structures, which followed on from Council Regulation (EEC) No 2328/91 of 15 July 1991 on improving the efficiency of agricultural structures and Council Directive 75/268/EEC of 28 April 1975 on mountain and hill farming and farming in certain less-favoured areas. The regulation also supplements Declaration 37 annexed to the Acts of Accession of Finland and Sweden; this declaration recognises the existence of permanent natural handicaps related to northern latitudes — which, in agricultural terms, mean short growing seasons — that are equivalent to those caused by high altitude.

The regulation lays down the general classification criteria (altitude, steep slopes, combination of the two) but does not specify a minimum threshold which Member States must respect. The wider application of the subsidiarity principle means that it is now up to national and/or regional authorities to set their own thresholds and classify their areas themselves, subject to respect for the basic Community criteria.

Most Member States and/or regions have interpreted the criteria of altitude and slope as follows:

- altitudes that can give rise to very difficult climate conditions: over 600-800 m (for each local authority or parts of several local authorities);
- slopes that are too steep for the use of machinery or that require the use of very expensive special equipment: average per km² of 20 % (11° 18').

The table below gives the 1996 figures for mountain and less-favoured areas in terms of UAA, as classified under Directive 75/268/EEC. Hence in Finland and Sweden most of the areas classified as 'mountain areas' are in fact cold Nordic areas, and only some 150 000 ha are true mountain areas:

Country	-1- Total UAA (Mha)	-2- Less-favoured area UAA (Mha)	-3- Less-favoured area UAA as a % of 1)	-4- Mountain UAA (Mha)	-5- Mountain UAA as a % of 1)
Belgium	1,357	0,3	22,1	—	—
Denmark	2,770	—	—	—	—
Germany	17,015	8,5	50,0	0,34	1,8
Greece	6,408	5,3	82,7	3,91	60,9
Spain	26,330	19,5	74,1	7,50	28,5
France	30,011	13,9	46,3	5,30	17,7
Ireland	4,892	3,5	71,6	—	—
Italy	16,496	8,8	53,4	5,22	31,5
Luxembourg	0,127	0,1	78,7	—	—
Netherlands	2,011	0,1	5,0	—	—
Portugal	3,998	3,4	85,0	1,23	30,0
UK	18,658	8,3	44,5	—	—
Austria	3,524	2,4	68,1	2,0	56,8
Finland	2,549	2,2	86,3	1,41	54,9
Sweden	3,634	1,9	52,3	0,53	13,8
Total	139,780	78,2	56,0	27,44	19,5

1.1.3. Own-initiative opinion of the Economic and Social Committee (CES 461/88)

‘(An upland area is) a physical, environmental, socio-economic and cultural region in which the disadvantages deriving from altitude and other natural factors must be considered in conjunction with socio-economic constraints, spatial imbalance and environmental decay.’

In the information report on a policy for upland areas drawn up by its Section for Regional Development and Town and Country Planning, the Economic and Social Committee (ESC) offered a standard definition of the term ‘upland area’ which accommodated the wide variety of physical, climatic, environmental and socio-economic conditions found in Europe’s upland and mountain regions. The following definition was thus suggested in own-initiative opinion CES 461/88:

On this basis, the ESC assembled the criteria used by the individual Member States to define mountain and hill areas under Directive 75/268/EEC and attempted to refine them by distinguishing, where possible, ‘predominantly’ upland areas (regional or local authorities in which over 66 % of the total area is upland) from ‘partially’ upland areas (in which between 33 % and 66 % of the total is upland).

	Criteria			Representativeness (***)	
	Altitude	Slope	Other criteria	Upland areas	Predominantly upland areas (>66 %)
B	300 m	—	—	—	—
D (*)	700 m	—	geoclimatic handicap	27,3 %	6,5 %
E	1 000 m	< 20 %	variation in altitude > 400 m	26,0 %	—
F	700 m Vosges 600 m	< 20 %	—	21,0 %	—
IRL	200 m	—	—	—	—
I	600/700 m	steep slope	—	49,4 %	28,2 %
UK (**)	240 m	—	—	23,3 %	—

(*) Excludes former GDR

(**) Excludes Northern Ireland

(***) As a percentage of the total area of the country

On the basis of the abovementioned report, the ESC concluded that:

‘The legal classification criteria used by the Member States and the Community to define upland areas need to be standardised, partly to eliminate any distortions in competition between the enterprises of different Member States. This standardisation requires the establishment at Community level of criteria covering various natural and socio-economic handicaps as suggested in the definition given in point 1.1.

The classification criteria should be:

a) natural disadvantages. This should not be limited to the factors used by Directive 75/268/EEC (altitude, slope, combination of these two), but:

- with regard to climate, should consider not only altitude but also latitude and geographical situation;
- with regard to the physical aspects, should consider not only slope but also relief, type of soil, etc.

b) socio-economic disadvantages:

- low population density;
- isolation caused by remoteness from cities and economic/political centres;
- population excessively dependent on agriculture;
- insufficient outlets downslope in areas bordering with third countries with whom communications are difficult;

c) degree of environmental decay

It is the combination of these factors which defines an area as “upland”. The minimum altitude at which an area qualifies as “upland” varies accordingly. Hence the choice and combination of these factors, and their use as yardsticks, cannot be uniform throughout the Community, but must be adapted to the various circumstances. (...)

Directive 75/268/EEC and most national laws use local authority areas (or parts of them) as the basic territorial unit for demarcating upland areas. In many cases, this practice has made the official upland areas rather irregular in size. Instead, measures should cover compact "blocks" of territory, i.e. units comprising uplands plus the immediately adjoining areas which are linked to them geographically, economically and socially. (...)

The European soil charter recently drawn up by the European Soil Bureau could be used for the establishment of further criteria for defining mountain or upland areas.

1.1.4. The UN environment programme

In the run-up to the 2002 International Year of Mountains, the UN environment programme undertook to define the concept of mountain and mountain area as follows:

'Altitude and slope and the environmental gradients they generate are key components of such a definition, but their combination is problematic. Simple altitude thresholds both exclude older and lower mountain systems and include areas of relatively high elevation that have little topographic relief and few environmental gradients. Using slope as a criterion on its own or in combination with altitude can resolve the latter problem but not the former.'

Using data available at world level, the following classes of mountain were defined on an empirical basis:

- altitude between 200 and 1 000 metres, with more than 300 m variation in altitude;
- altitude between 1 000 and 1 500 metres, with gradient over 5° or more than 300 m variation in altitude;
- altitude between 1 500 and 2 500 metres and gradient over 2°;

- altitude between 2 500 and 3 500 metres;
- altitude between 3 500 and 4 500 metres;
- altitude above 4 500 metres.

1.2. Importance of mountain areas in Europe

Compared with other continents, Europe has a large and very diverse spread of mountain regions, stretching from the Arctic to the Mediterranean via the Alps and other ranges in temperate areas. Mountain and upland areas cover around 38,8 % of the total EU area. They provide a wealth of highly specific and vital resources for the whole of Europe: water, forests, rare habitats and species, unique cultural roots, a storehouse of resources and areas for recreation.

Four main mountain areas may be distinguished within the EU:

- mountain and similar areas (arctic areas) of northern Europe (Finland, Sweden, Scotland);
- mountain areas in temperate regions: Cantabrian mountains, Pyrenees, Massif Central, Jura, Vosges and Black Forest, Alps, Ardennes, Welsh mountains, etc.;
- Mediterranean mountain areas: Iberian system, Apennines, the mountains of mainland Greece and the Greek islands, and those of the major Mediterranean islands (Crete, Sicily, Sardinia, Corsica, Majorca);
- outlying and outermost island regions, such as the Atlantic archipelagos (Macaronesian region) of the Canaries, Azores and Madeira, and the French overseas departments of Guadeloupe, Martinique, Reunion and French Guiana.

	Importance of mountain areas
B	
D	360 000 ha; i.e. around 4 % of disadvantaged areas
GR	50 % of national territory 90,8 % of woodlands 79,5 % of pastureland 46 % of farmland 3 293 local and regional authorities (59,8 % of the national total) 10,2 % of the national population population density of mountain areas: 36 per km ² (national average: 74 per km ²)

	Importance of mountain areas
E	<p>38 % of national territory</p> <p>88 % of woodlands</p> <p>16 % of farmland</p> <p>35,7 % of local authorities</p> <p>around 6,3 million inhabitants (16 % of the national population)</p> <p>population density of mountain areas: 32,7 per km²</p>
F	<p>17,4 % of national territory</p> <p>33,7 % of woodlands</p> <p>31,4 % of farmland</p> <p>6 128 of local authorities (17 % of the national total) and 92 towns</p> <p>3,6 million inhabitants (7,7 % of the national population)</p> <p>population density of mountain areas: 31 per km² (< $\frac{2}{3}$ of the national average)</p>
IRL	
I	<p>106 107 km² (35,2 % of national territory)</p> <p>58,1 % of woodlands</p> <p>24,4 % of farmland</p> <p>2 605 local authorities (32,1 % of the national total)</p> <p>7,5 million inhabitants (13,1 % of the national population)</p> <p>population density of mountain areas: 70,7 per km²</p>
A	<p>70 % of national territory</p> <p>57 % of farmland</p> <p>around 3 million inhabitants in mountain areas (37,5 % of the national population)</p> <p>around 1 170 municipalities in mountain areas (almost 50 %)</p>
P	<p>40 % of national territory</p> <p>50 % of woodlands and pastureland</p> <p>50 % of agricultural crops</p> <p>23 % of the national population</p>

	Importance of mountain areas
FIN	<p>151 313 km² (45 % of national territory)</p> <p>95 % of woodlands</p> <p>85 % of farmland is in disadvantaged areas and 6 % is in mountain areas</p> <p>441 local authorities in disadvantaged and isolated areas, 94 towns in disadvantaged areas and 10 towns in isolated areas</p> <p>3,5 million inhabitants live in disadvantaged areas (68 % of the national population, 9 % in mountain areas)</p> <p>population density of mountain areas: 2,6 per km² (national average: 16 per km²)</p>
S	<p>5 % of the population</p> <p>population density of mountain areas: 2 per km²</p>
UK	

Source: Information taken from a study drawn up for the European Parliament entitled Towards a European policy for mountain regions — problems, results obtained and adjustments needed.

1.3. Economic aspects

Economic activities in mountain areas are concentrated mainly in the valleys which provide natural corridors. Today however, many of these valleys have become transport bottlenecks, and the growth in traffic — both goods and people — brings increasing risks to safety and the environment, and to some extent also to the living conditions of the local population. In many of these areas, economic activity is based on agriculture — on the land which is usable — and on tourism and other services. In some mountain areas, however, economic activity is often very weak. While some are economically viable and are integrated into the rest of the EU economy, most of them face a number of problems: some 61,5 % of mountain and arctic areas are eligible for assistance under Objective 1 and 24,7 % under Objective 2 (see the second report on economic and social cohesion ⁽¹⁾).

A brief typology of mountain areas may be obtained by combining natural factors with socio-economic indicators. Such a typology, although imprecise, can provide a general picture of the situation.

⁽¹⁾ COM(2001) 24 final.

Typology of mountain and arctic areas according to the EU definition of mountain areas and of areas covered by the objectives of the Structural Funds

	Objective 1	Objective 2	Not eligible
Areas where altitude creates very difficult climatic conditions (minimum altitude between 600 and 800 metres)	High mountain areas in southern, central and north west Spain, Corsica, southern Italy (including Sicily) and Greece (including Crete). The higher mountains of Sweden and Finland (Lapland)	Central part of the Pyrenees, the Massif Central, Jura, Vosges, southern French Alps, northern Appennines and western and eastern Alps in Italy, large part of the Austrian Alps	Some north-western parts of the French Alps (in Savoie-Dauphinois), the central Alps in Italy (in Piedmont and Lombardy). Large part of the German Alps
Areas at lower altitude and/or with significant variations in altitude (generally more than 20 %)	Other mountain areas of Portugal, of southern, central and north-western Spain, of Corsica, of southern Italy (including Sardinia and Sicily) and of Greece (including Crete). Other mountain areas of Sweden and Finland (Lapland)	Peripheral parts of the Pyrenees, Massif Central, Jura and Vosges. Northern Appennines and western and eastern Alps in Italy	Some north-western parts of the French Alps (in Savoie-Dauphinois), the central Alps in Italy (in Piedmont and Lombardy). Large part of the German Alps
Other areas north of the 62° parallel and some adjacent areas	Lowland areas of Sweden and Finland north of the 62° Parallel (mainly some inland areas)	Other lowland areas of Sweden and Finland north of the 62° Parallel (mainly coastal areas of Sweden and inland areas of southern Finland)	

Sustainable development of mountain areas calls for economic efficiency, social equity, territorial cohesion and ecological

integrity. The main challenges and potential of Europe's mountain areas are summarised in the following table:

Challenges and potential of mountain areas

Challenges	Potential
<i>In social terms</i>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> — Serious risk of gradual but irreversible depopulation — Longer distances and hence more uneven distribution of basic infrastructure in comparison with that found in lowlands — Lack of personal, household and business services — Lack of compensation for the services which mountain communities provide for society as a whole by managing and protecting resources, landscapes and ecosystems 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> — Provision of leisure and recreational activities for city dwellers, responding to a growing wish to explore alternative life styles in natural or cultural surroundings that have been carefully conserved

Challenges	Potential
<i>In economic terms</i>	
— Growing difficulty of traditional activities such as agriculture, forestry and tourism	— New income sources typical of mountain areas and new sources of employment facilitated by the development of new technologies, particularly in the information and communication field
<i>In ecological terms</i>	
— Growing pressure on areas made vulnerable by abandonment of the land, bad management of water resources, seasonal influxes of visitors and a congested road network	— New prospects created by advanced technologies (renewable energy sources, multimodal transport, geographical information systems) — General trend towards dynamic collaboration between the environment and development

1.4. *Impact of Community and national policies*

Some Community policies already have a significant impact on mountain areas. They include:

- the Common Agricultural Policy: compensatory allowance for less-favoured areas, agri-environment measures, market regime for products from mountain areas (milk, meat), etc.;
- structural policy — Objectives 1 and 2 — and cohesion policy;
- Community initiatives for rural development (Leader +) and crossborder, transnational and interregional cooperation (Interreg III A, B and C) — cf. the Interreg III B 'Alpine Area' cooperation programme between Germany, Austria, France, Italy, Switzerland, Slovenia and Liechtenstein;
- forestry policies;
- the debate on spatial development centred on the European Spatial Development Perspective (ESDP) and its implementation;
- common environment policy: the main directives on water, habitats, wild fauna and flora, soil, etc.;
- research and technological development policy and the significant improvements this should bring to quality of life.

2. **Institutional stances regarding mountain areas**

For some years now, Europe has seen a number of resolutions and recommendations on mountain areas, issued by the relevant ministers, the former standing conference of local and regional authorities of Europe (now the Congress of Local and Regional Authorities of Europe), and the parliamentary assembly and committee of ministers of the Council of Europe.

The following documents are of particular political and technical significance:

- ESC opinion (1998) on 'A policy for upland areas';
- CoR opinion (1995) on 'The European charter on mountain areas';
- ESC opinion (1996) on 'The Alpine Arc: an opportunity for development and integration';
- CoR opinion (1997) on 'A policy for upland agriculture in Europe';
- Report of the European Parliament's Committee for Agriculture and Rural Development (1998) on A new strategy for mountain regions, which refers to an earlier study by the EP's Directorate-General for Research entitled Towards a European policy for Mountain Regions;
- European Parliament resolution on 25 years' application of Community legislation for hill and mountain farming.

The Economic and Social Committee has recently been working on a lengthy opinion (rapporteur: Mr Bastian) on the Future of upland areas in the EU.

2.1. *Convention on the Protection of the Alps*

The Convention on the Protection of the Alps was signed in 1991 by representatives of the governments of the Alpine countries and of the European Union. Its aim is develop a common policy for the whole Alpine region in accordance with sustainable development principles. For the first time, it views the Alpine Arc as an indivisible unit that is part of Europe's common heritage.

The convention's broad objectives are to achieve a balance between the socio-economic needs of Alpine communities and the need to safeguard the Alpine environment.

The convention entered into force in March 1995, having been ratified by Austria, Germany, Liechtenstein, Slovenia and the European Union. It has since been ratified by the other Alpine countries. The convention includes provision for a research programme focusing on four topics (prevention of air pollution, management of water resources, waste management, and population and culture). Its implementing protocols are to foster the adoption of policies on transport, tourism, soil conservation, forests, energy, agriculture, etc.

The convention has set up bodies which hold regular meetings and play an implementing role. However, the EU does not appear to have taken any political action or introduced any operational instruments specifically as a result of the convention or its implementing protocols, despite being a signatory. The EU has also let slip the opportunity to take part in the proceedings of the convention bodies. This is regrettable, as the Alps form the largest mountain range in Europe in terms of geographical area, population and countries concerned. The European Commission could thus have taken some practical steps to promote Community policies for mountain areas.

2.2. *European Charter of Mountain Regions*

The need for a European Charter of Mountain Regions, as an instrument defining the principles that should govern the planning, development and protection of mountain regions, was addressed by the second European conference of mountain regions, held in Trento in 1988. However, the document was not approved by participants (over 200 administrators representing the member states of the Council of Europe) until six years later, at the third conference, in Chamonix on 15 to 17 September 1994. Procedures for the definitive adoption of the charter by the signatory states have not yet been completed. The charter takes an integrated global approach aimed at establishing a European policy for mountain areas, in line with

the recommendations of the 1992 Rio de Janeiro conference on Environment and Development.

Importance is also attached to the principle of subsidiarity, with the involvement of local and regional authorities in the framing and management of European policy. The charter thus enshrines the role of mountain communities, not least in the pursuit of a fair balance between economic activities and ecological requirements. It is worth citing the objectives of the charter, Article 6 of which states that:

'The Parties shall base their policies, legislation and action regarding mountain areas on the following aims:

- I. explicit recognition of mountain regions and their specific nature;
- II. due regard for and recognition of the geographical entity constituted by each mountain area, so as to prevent existing or future administrative divisions from hindering the implementation of mountain policies;
- III. maintaining populations in situ and combating the out-migration of young people;
- IV. establishment or modernisation of infrastructure and amenities necessary to the quality of life in, and the development of, mountain regions;
- V. maintenance and improvement of local public services;
- VI. preservation of agricultural and pastoral land and essential maintenance and modernisation of agricultural activities through a specific approach to mountain agriculture;
- VII. development of endogenous energy resources;
- VIII. conservation of long-standing industrial and craft activities and establishment of industries based on new technologies;
- IX. development of the tertiary sector, particularly tourism, as a supplement to traditional livelihoods;
- X. preservation of the identity and dissemination of the cultural values specific to mountains and to each homogeneous mountain area.

These aims shall be achieved while respecting and protecting the environment as a result of an overall assessment of human and natural resources, abandoning the traditional choice between economic development and protection of the natural environment and seeking to establish a balance between human activities and ecological requirements.'

As can be seen, the programme adopts an appropriate and modern approach.

2.3. *The Second Report on Economic and Social Cohesion*

The Commission recently adopted its Second Report on Economic and Social Cohesion.

One major innovation of the report is that in the summary of Part I: Situation and Trends, it singles out specific areas and states that:

'Islands and archipelagos, mountain and peripheral areas — including the "outermost" regions — are an important part of the Union and share many common physical and geo-morphological characteristics and economic disadvantages. These regions generally suffer accessibility problems which make their economic integration with the rest of the Union more of a challenge. Accordingly, a large number already receive EU regional aid — 95 % of both mountain areas and islands are covered by Objective 1 or 2. At the same time, their social and economic conditions vary widely...'

The report goes on to identify economic and social cohesion priorities, and mentions 'areas with severe geographical or natural handicaps' where efforts to achieve integration run into difficulty. The report notes that:

'These areas — outermost regions, islands, mountain areas, peripheral areas, areas with very low population density — are often a key component of the Union's environmental and cultural heritage. There are often acute difficulties in maintaining population. Additional costs for basic services, including transport, can impede economic development.'

It thus appears clear that the Commission puts mountain areas on the same footing as the other areas already mentioned in Article 158 of the Treaty.

Following the debates on the second report, the Commission decided to undertake a series of studies on areas facing serious geographical or natural handicaps. Two have been launched, on island regions and mountain areas (including arctic areas). The study is also to devise criteria for delimiting these areas.

The Commission has also assessed the debates held at the second European cohesion forum in May 2001, and has concluded ⁽¹⁾ that the Union needs a cohesion policy targeted at three categories of region:

- regions whose development is lagging very far behind, most but not all of which are situated in the applicant countries;
- regions of the EU-15 which have not completed the convergence process;
- other regions which face serious structural problems, particularly urban areas, rural areas, which are still highly dependent on agriculture, mountain areas, islands and other areas suffering from natural or demographic handicaps.

Hence, if only at Commission level, the specific nature of mountain areas appears to have been recognised and made the subject of analyses.

Further evidence of the new interest with which the Commission views the EU's mountain areas is clear from the conference which the regional policy and agriculture commissioners staged in Brussels on 17 and 18 October 2002. Although this conference, which was also attended by President Prodi and other commissioners, did not issue a concluding document, the high standard of the debates and topics covered give grounds to hope that the new approach will yield some definitive positive results.

A number of parties are echoing this call to devote greater attention to mountain areas. The European Economic and Social Committee has recently adopted a highly relevant opinion on the subject, in which it calls for the adoption of a common approach to mountain areas by enshrining their special status in the Treaties.

The opinion also proposes a strategy based on compensation for those handicaps which cannot be remedied, the active reduction of handicap factors and promotion of the special identity and resources of mountain areas. The opinion concludes by calling for EU policy for mountain areas to be made a model of fair, sustainable development for the people who live there.

2.4. *International Year of Mountains*

On 10 November 1998 the UN General Assembly unanimously proclaimed 2002 the International Year of Mountains, with a view to:

- 1) promoting the sustainable development of mountain areas;

⁽¹⁾ COM(2002) 46 final.

II) improving the quality of life for people living in mountain areas;

III) protecting the fragile upland ecosystem.

Preparations for the global conference which the UN will hold in 2002 are under way in many European countries.

However, no official political action or legislative initiative has yet been adopted at Community level to reflect the UN objectives.

2.5. *Chapter 13 of Agenda 21 and the World Summit in Johannesburg*

Agenda 21 was adopted at the UN conference on Environment and Development in Rio de Janeiro on 14 June 1992. Many chapters of the agenda refer explicitly to mountain areas, namely:

Chapter 2: International cooperation

Chapter 3: Combating poverty

Chapter 6: Protecting and promoting human health

Chapter 7: Human settlements

Chapter 8: Integrating environment and development in decision making

Chapter 11: Combating deforestation

Chapter 12: Combating desertification

Chapter 14: Sustainable agriculture and rural development

Chapter 15: Conservation of biodiversity

Chapter 18: Protection and management of water resources

Chapter 24: Women and sustainable development

Chapter 26: Strengthening the role of indigenous people

Chapter 27: Strengthening the role of NGOs

Chapter 28: Local authorities' initiatives in support of Agenda 21

Chapter 32: Strengthening the role of farmers

Chapter 33: Financing of sustainable development

Chapter 34: Transfer of environmentally sound technology

Chapter 35: Science for sustainable development

Chapter 36: Education, public awareness and training

Chapter 37: Capacity-building for sustainable development

Chapter 39: International legal instruments

Chapter 40: Information for decision-making (etc.)

Chapter 13 considers mountain areas as a unitary system. The definition was reached following close cooperation between UN agencies, national governments, international organisations, NGOs and research institutes. It is worth quoting the declaration which appears at the beginning of Chapter 13:

'Mountains are an important source of water, energy and biological diversity. Furthermore, they are a source of such key resources as minerals, forest products and agricultural products and of recreation. As a major ecosystem representing the complex and interrelated ecology of our planet, mountain environments are essential to the survival of the global ecosystem. Mountain ecosystems are, however, rapidly changing. They are susceptible to accelerated soil erosion, landslides and rapid loss of habitat and genetic diversity. On the human side, there is widespread poverty among mountain inhabitants and loss of indigenous knowledge. As a result, most global mountain areas are experiencing environmental degradation. Hence, the proper management of mountain resources and socio-economic development of the people deserves immediate action.'

The most recent follow-up to the Rio Conference came with the holding of the World Summit on Sustainable Development in Johannesburg in September 2002. Mountain areas are dealt with in Paragraph 40 of the Summit's plan of implementation:

'40. Mountain ecosystems support particular livelihoods, and include significant watershed resources, biological diversity and unique flora and fauna. Many are particularly fragile and vulnerable to the adverse effects of climate change and need specific protection. Actions at all levels are required to:

- (a) Develop and promote programmes, policies and approaches that integrate environmental, economic and social components of sustainable mountain development and strengthen international cooperation for its positive impacts on poverty eradication programmes, especially in developing countries;

- (b) Implement programmes to address, where appropriate, deforestation, erosion, land degradation, loss of biodiversity, disruption of water flows and retreat of glaciers;
- (c) Develop and implement, where appropriate, gender-sensitive policies and programmes, including public and private investments that help eliminate inequities facing mountain communities;
- (d) Implement programmes to promote diversification and traditional mountain economies, sustainable livelihoods and small-scale production systems, including specific training programmes and better access to national and international markets, communications and transport planning, taking into account the particular sensitivity of mountains;
- (e) Promote full participation and involvement of mountain communities in decisions that affect them and integrate indigenous knowledge, heritage and values in all development initiatives;
- (f) Mobilise national and international support for applied research and capacity-building, provide financial and technical assistance for the effective implementation of sustainable development of mountain ecosystems in developing countries and countries with economies in transition, and address the poverty among people living in mountains through concrete plans, projects and programmes, with sufficient support from all stakeholders, taking into account the spirit of the International Year of Mountains, 2002.'

2.6. *World Charter of Mountain Populations*

This charter was adopted by representatives of 70 countries on 9 June 2000 in Chambéry at the conclusion of the first world forum of mountain populations.

The draft needs to be discussed before it becomes the basic guiding text of the International Organisation of Mountain Populations, which is to be established for the implementation of the charter. For the moment, the draft merely sets out general principles. It will be fleshed out with other sectoral recommendations and suggestions which emerged at the forum and probably with further contributions made at the next meeting in Quito (Ecuador) in September 2002.

3. **Legal situation of the EU's mountain areas**

The European Union has repeatedly been called upon to give attention to mountain areas.

Many of the documents issued on this subject have called for the adoption of a Council or Commission regulation (or directive) containing specific measures for mountain areas and thereby instigating an integrated multisectoral policy.

In more recent years, other parties have pressed for the adoption of a specific Structural Fund 'objective' for mountain areas, to be added to those used in cohesion policy until 2000.

However, it seems clear that the Community cannot adopt any specific initiative (beyond the modest sectoral scheme already in operation for hill farming) without the backing of a specific Treaty provision enshrining Community competence in this field.

The Union must thus recognise the special nature of mountain areas and the ensuing need for a specific institutional policy on the matter, with due respect for the subsidiarity principle. Although the economic situation of mountain areas varies, they all share certain features which affect the living conditions of local residents, in terms of the organisation and running of services, information, access and mobility. There is a particularly pressing need for policies to safeguard and promote the environment, landscape and biodiversity, the traditional farming practices of the people who settled here from distant lands centuries ago and who have tended the countryside ever since, and the outstanding historical, cultural and artistic treasures of each area.

Official recognition of the special features of mountain areas is a vital precondition for all kinds of sectoral measures.

Article 158 of Title XVII (Economic and Social Cohesion) of the Treaty states that:

'In order to promote its overall harmonious development, the Community shall develop its actions leading to the strengthening of its economic and social cohesion.

In particular, the Community shall aim at reducing disparities between the levels of development of the various regions and the backwardness of the least favoured regions or islands, including rural areas.'

If the aim is to create conditions in which the European institutions can in future establish policies or specific measures for mountain areas, these areas must be explicitly mentioned alongside those already listed at the end of Article 158. The phrase 'rural areas' in the current version does not cover 'mountain areas', and the specific nature of mountain areas needs to be formally recognised.

4. Mountain regions and the future of Europe

The future of Europe is now a key issue for the whole continent, as its peoples consider the arrangements by which it will be governed in the new millennium.

A simple truth is becoming increasingly clear: Europe cannot be built according to simple mechanical designs, or by planning everything rationally down to the last detail, or by the mere conclusion of agreements between countries.

The new Europe will be the result of a complex procedure in which the unification of civil society and the integration of interests and roles, political leanings and external relations must occur gradually, by means of an extensive top-level mediation process that is political in nature rather than technocratic.

For this to have any meaning, the new Europe must pay close attention to the elements which have bound it together historically, anthropologically, culturally and physically. And mountains are surely the epitome of these elements.

One or two people may have thought it possible to envisage a Europe of the new millennium that has no policy for those areas which physically bind together the more developed regions of the continent. But it must be remembered that the 'strong' areas of the new European Union are linked precisely by its uplands. This is true not only as regards transport, but as regards links between economic areas in general. The Po valley is linked to the Rhine valley by the Alps, while economically vibrant Catalonia is linked to the south of France by the Pyrenees. The Alpine-Appennine axis forms the skeleton that supports Italy, to use the image of the Italian economist Giustino Fortunato (the mountains forming the bones and the lowlands the soft tissue). With a view to the EU's eastward enlargement, the Balkans form a bridge into the Slav countries while the Tatra mountains link Poland and Hungary — new regions of the EU from 2004. Mountain areas also contain points of social and economic excellence; in the Alps alone, the path from Grenoble to Bratislava goes through Voralberg, Tyrol, Carinthia, Salzburgerland and some famous regions of Italy.

To continue with Fortunato's image, a Europe of 'strong areas' that are merely interconnected by these 'bones' is clearly undesirable. A European policy for mountain areas is therefore necessary, not in order to add the word 'mountain' to the list of beneficiaries of EU assistance in one form or another, but because mountains are a paradigm for European integration. Europe's mountain regions have long developed a pluralist political view that is intrinsically tolerant and open to discussion and cooperative planning. To some extent, such an approach is inherent in their very nature.

However, these areas are not immune from the challenges posed by globalisation and its countercurrent: the growing sense of local identity which, if left unchecked, leads to blinkered and uncohesive views — in other words, the exact opposite of integration — that fuel anti-European policies. It is no coincidence that these views are also beginning to take root in mountain areas, in the absence of a European policy for them and given the frequent failure of individual EU policies to cater for the distinctive features of mountain areas.

The European Commission and the European Parliament should give more careful consideration to the potential role of mountain areas in the integration of the Union as a whole. A small step would suffice: a guiding thought, a possibly unconventional choice, a rejection of technocratic and bureaucratic procedures. In short, all that is needed is a policy predicated on the idea that the new Union must be built on a new form of governance that does not rest solely on the nation state but draws strength from other key elements, including Europe's mountains.

A comprehensive model will not be possible, particularly in the coming decades when civil society will be heavily influenced by the interplay of interests and political and cultural schools of thought. The need for a high-level policy that uses cohesive elements to build a new model Union will then be all the greater.

Mountain areas thus represent a key challenge for the Union. And this is why a more sophisticated vision is needed — a vision of a Union in which political debate does not focus solely on the quality and quantity of its meat and milk, and in which mountain areas have a positive contribution to make. This means abandoning the stereotyped picture of Alpine shepherds in their meadows and resisting the temptation (which some people in Europe still fall prey to) to view mountain areas as solely an environmental or agricultural issue.

5. Mountains and cities

The present report and the ideas and recommendations it contains have clearly been drawn up in the interests of the people who continue to live and work, and to form civil and political communities, in mountain areas.

However, it is now universally recognised that these communities play a valuable role not only for their own regions but also — and to an increasingly significant degree — for lowland dwellers in the main population and business centres. Mountain dwellers are custodians of the land, the environment and the landscape. They help to protect the soil and provide areas and opportunities for recreational, cultural and sporting activities. They also produce such strategic goods as timber, water, energy and mineral resources. The goods which they produce are particularly prized for their wholesomeness and for the fact that they reflect a longstanding balance between the natural world and the needs of man.

A European policy for mountain areas is thus not only beneficial to mountain dwellers, but to everyone.

6. Concluding remarks and proposals

The Committee of the Regions

1. Points out that no part of Europe can be destined to remain a marginal area and suffer steady depopulation.

2. Emphasises that for years now, but so far to no avail, the EU decision-making bodies have received pressing calls to give proper consideration to Europe's mountain areas, bearing in mind the special situation generated by 'natural handicaps' on account of their high altitude and slope, tough climate and distinctive geomorphology, remoteness and special difficulties, including the cost of establishing and maintaining transport infrastructure. These areas' natural circumstances have created flora and fauna which is unique both in its own right and in its diversity. Their special living conditions also include their particular plant and animal populations, and the particular living conditions of their residents, not least in terms of the supply and management of services, information, access and mobility.

3. Stresses that Europe's mountain areas have been inhabited for thousands of years and must remain so. Their inhabitants must not feel that they have been abandoned. They must be guaranteed modern living conditions and amenities; they must be given opportunities and support for wide-ranging and sustainable economic development; and their local and regional cultures must be respected and safeguarded.

4. Points out that much of Europe's biodiversity is found in its mountain areas, and that the presence of a sufficient active population is necessary in order to protect the water, soil and environment of these areas, look after their forests and specific cultural assets, and provide goods and services that are of incalculable value to the people of Europe as a whole.

5. Notes that mountain areas have particular characteristics and that although many of them are also 'rural areas', the two concepts are not the same. By the same token, although some mountain areas are also undoubtedly 'disadvantaged', it is not acceptable that the EU's concern for these areas should focus solely on their economic difficulties.

6. Believes that the Treaty should take account of the concept of 'territorial cohesion' as a complementary element of 'economic and social cohesion'.

7. Thinks that explicit mention of mountain areas in the Treaty would provide a basis for Community competence in this field. This would at last open the way to systematic policies and evaluations for the various populations and areas, with formal recognition of particular mountain circumstances, thereby facilitating the coordination of individual Community policies, with due respect for the subsidiarity principle.

8. Therefore calls for Treaty Article 158 and the corresponding Title to be amended to explicitly add 'mountain areas' to the existing mention of 'least favoured regions or islands, including rural areas'; and for the term 'territorial' to be added to the mention of 'economic and social cohesion'.

9. Considers that, alongside the legal enshrinement of the special status of mountain areas, there is a need for EU competition regulations that take account of this special status and seek to reduce the economic and structural disadvantages facing production and social structures in mountain areas by setting up financial and economic support and long-term tax incentives with a structural basis.

10. Views mountain areas as custodians of features of our cultural, social and political heritage that should be valued and promoted. The special identity of their populations is an asset which should be preserved as a distinct piece of the rich mosaic that makes up each country and Europe as a whole.

11. Strongly advocates sustainable rules regarding transport policies that guarantee uniform basic conditions for the management of road traffic and rail networks in mountain areas. These areas cannot be treated simply as transit corridors. Intelligent solutions must be devised that balance economic growth requirements with the need to protect human health and the environment. This also includes the extension of infrastructure and the improvement of crossborder rail services. For the funding of particularly costly infrastructure schemes in ecologically sensitive areas, Community legislation should allow cross-sectoral funding of rail infrastructure using revenue from parallel road networks, to support the necessary transfer of goods traffic from road to rail.

12. Notes that the policies being pursued all over Europe for rationalising public spending and privatising services often cause irreversible damage to mountain communities. Education, health, transport, postal and telecommunications services are being scaled down almost everywhere. The provision of sufficiently extensive services of a high standard is both a basic prerequisite for the survival of the local population and a key factor for the development and growth of mountain areas as a whole. Whenever such services are reorganised, the public authorities must therefore shoulder particular responsibility and pay special attention to the situation in these areas so that levels of service are not merely maintained, but also improved. At all events the EU Treaty must clearly guarantee that mountain areas have equal access to universal services of general interest which serve the common good. Privatisation schemes must therefore include safeguards and guarantees to keep up the level of service provision in these areas.

13. Believes that the mountain economy must be given an opportunity to flourish and that Community programmes must therefore include provision for:

- the development of local service networks, especially IT networks for businesses, households, schools and other institutions and NGOs;
- policies that help young people to find employment in businesses in a variety of sectors, with particular emphasis on young entrepreneurs;
- promotion and simplification of multi-tasking;
- promotion of vocational qualifications that meet changing needs.

14. Suggests that when implementing the sixth R&D framework programme, the European Commission takes due account of the problems of mountain areas and promotes the establishment of a European network linking all the research bodies active in mountain areas.

15. Stresses the need for a Community policy that helps the populations of Europe's various mountain areas to manage coherent, coordinated, integrated actions within the framework of broader, deeper self-government rooted in local and regional democracy. That is also vital in allowing the subsidiarity principle full play.

16. Calls on the Commission, with a view to the EU's forthcoming enlargement, to formulate an overall Community strategy for the sustainable development of the mountain areas of the EU and the applicant states, including provisions for the development of rural areas and the conservation of upland agriculture. This strategy should encompass crossborder cooperation in mountain areas and set out specific measures under the Interreg, Phare, Tacis and Sapard programmes, so as to enable the applicant states and other regions adjoining the EU to benefit from measures for mountain areas. That is particularly important for the Sami, the indigenous people living in northern and central Sweden, Finland, Norway and northern Russia.

17. Considers it vitally important that the Commission promote research on a common classification system for mountain areas and the impact of climate change on these regions. Support for a common designation-of-origin mark for products from Europe's mountain areas, in line with the relevant EU rules, is also called for.

18. Calls on the Commission to draw up a clear definition of mountain areas based on criteria relating to natural characteristics (e.g. altitude, slope, short growing season and soil configuration) and to socio-economic criteria (e.g. population density, demographic trends, age pyramid, scale of economic activities and economic development potential), and to combinations thereof, so as to clearly distinguish mountain areas from other disadvantaged areas when preparing development strategies and support mechanisms, given the different problems facing these areas.

19. Considers it absolutely vital to offset permanent natural handicaps by providing allowances. Such allowances must be retained as a key part of the policy for mountain areas, in tandem with the diversification of economic activities through the use of differentiated compensatory payments.

20. Stresses that alongside support under the second pillar of the CAP, the economies of mountain areas must receive additional support from the Structural Funds, with particular attention for transport, telecommunications and support for the development of businesses not directly involved in agriculture or tourism. The development priorities for these areas must also include progressive provision of minimum essential services and infrastructure, both in the fields of education, health and transport and in new communication and information sectors.

21. Stresses that it must be possible to combine support under the second pillar of the CAP with Structural Fund measures. It therefore proposes that the second pillar of the CAP (rural development) be structured as a set of options, with areas of action that can be combined with measures from the options discussed for the future Structural Funds. To ensure maximum impact, extensive local and regional influence over measures is a necessity.

22. Asks the Commission to consider the case for allowing premium products from duly delimited mountain areas to use a mark indicating their mountain origin, alongside the PGI/PDO mark.

23. Supports the conclusion of regional conventions modelled on the Convention on the Protection of the Alps and possibly in the context of crossborder cooperation, to institutionalise and step up cooperation in addressing specific regional and crossborder problems and thus providing a practical demonstration of a Europe of the regions.

24. Efforts to promote equal opportunities for women and men must be stepped up. In particular the Committee of the Regions observes that such action, according to the latest research findings, is a development factor per se. Where depopulation is a problem, well-developed social support and access to a broader range of cultural facilities are of major importance in stemming the exodus of women and young people from rural and mountain areas. Adequate educational

and advanced training programmes, particularly for young people (including young farmers), play an important part in enabling them to find employment.

25. Considers that compensatory national and regional measures must be adopted to help mountain areas, with derogations to Community rules on state aid, in order to allow the provision of public interest services throughout these areas and to offset the reduction in structural support which they will face as a result of the increasing call on structural aid after EU enlargement.

26. Stresses the need to provide mountain areas with adequate structural policy instruments after 2006, and to continue to provide these for as long as their special problems persist.

27. Calls on the Commission to include provision, within its overall strategy for mountain areas, for specific support mechanisms to encourage the use in these areas of renewable energy sources, in a manner that is compatible with the environment and the landscape, particularly as regards the use of water resources and the sustainable development of mountain woodlands.

28. Calls on the European Commission to participate regularly in the proceedings of the bodies of the Convention on the Protection of the Alps.

29. Proposes that the EU institutions promote the identification and dissemination of good practice for the management of mountain areas, sustainable development activities, and schemes for overcoming the difficulties inherent in the delivery of services. Lastly, the Committee would stress the importance of transnational exchanges of experience at local and regional level.

30. Special account must be taken of the dairy sector in mountain areas, where instruments must be applied in an attempt to maintain a widespread network of small farms.

Brussels, 12 February 2003.

The President
of the Committee of the Regions
Albert BORE