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► To cite this version:

Cristina del Biaggio. Bridging national boundaries: how networks of local actors are building the Alpine region. *Procedia - Social and Behavioral Sciences*, 2011, 14, pp.121-128. 10.1016/j.sbspro.2011.03.029 . hal-02541065

HAL Id: hal-02541065

<https://hal.science/hal-02541065>

Submitted on 12 Apr 2020

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Regional Environmental Governance: Interdisciplinary Perspectives, Theoretical Issues,
Comparative Designs (REGov)

Bridging national boundaries: how networks of local actors are building the Alpine region

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Abstract

In the Alpine context, civil society organisations, with help of committed local actors (inhabitants, local representatives, researchers, managers of protected areas, and ecological associations) organised in networks, are bridging national boundaries to deal with environmental issues (Debarbieux & Rudaz, 2008). But, despite the willingness to focus on more horizontal relations, the administrative, political and ideological structures of the networks and their members do not completely detach themselves from the national level, as this paper shows.

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Keywords: Alps; regionalisation; cross-border cooperation; pan-Alpine networks; scale; ecoregional governance

1. Introduction

Mountains in general, and the Alps in particular, gained political weight in the last decades (Debarbieux, 2009a, p. 11; Debarbieux & Price, 2008). This process took form in the Alps under the leadership of the Alpine states and the European Union. In 1991, the eight Alpine states signed an international treaty. The *Alpine Convention* and the European Union has funded a six-year programme (2007-2013) to promote transnational cooperation in the Alps.

These initiatives, identified by some scientists as “top-down” (Bätzing, 1994), set a framework that enabled local projects to gain importance. They often took the form of pan-Alpine networks, involving, among others, municipalities, cities, ski resorts, protected areas and enterprises. The *Commission Internationale pour la Protection des Alpes* (CIPRA) is the main initiator of these networks. Since the 1950s it has acted to promote at the Alpine level, first, nature conservation and, later, sustainable development. CIPRA plays a central role in the effectiveness of the networks, which are nevertheless in existence thanks to the strong commitment of active local actors (Del Biaggio, 2009, p. 89).

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Thanks to these two interconnected processes, the Alps constitute one of these transborder regions that, following McNeill, contribute to the shift from a one dimensional map of Europe with fixed borders to one in which other scales of action (city-based, regional, national, and European) can be considered as fluid (McNeill, 2004, p. 89). As Jouni Häkli suggests, regionalisation in the form of networking to conclude strategic alliances at the transnational level may bring to a “New Europe” (Häkli, 1998, p. 98). However, the author raises the questions of whether regional networking among the elite is able to create spatially disembedded political formations, and if policymaking will divorce from its traditional territorial base (Häkli, 1998, p. 90).

This paper explores how, thanks to the above presented scaling down initiatives aiming at rooting the Alpine Convention at the local level, the Alps are being organised as an area of collective action (Debarbieux, 2009). It identifies the different territorial levels (local, national and pan-Alpine) involved in the making of the Alpine region and in the building of a new form of governance at the mountain range scale (see also Del Biaggio 2009). It gives some elements, taken from the Alpine example, to answer to the issues brought up by Häkli.

First, I will identify the main protagonists of this rescaling process. Second, I will analyse the rhetoric of the members of the networks, showing, in the third part, that there is a gap between their discourse and their practice. The paper will be based on the existing literature and on interviews conducted at the Department of Geography of the University of Geneva in the context of two research projects dealing with pan-Alpine networks.

2. Pan-Alpine regional governance: a range of actors engaged for sustainable Alps

Following Väyrynen, we are assisting at a vertical and a horizontal reorganization of the territorial levels. The shrinking of the national level made possible new vertical configurations between the international and the local to emerge, at the same time that networks are reorganizing horizontal links (Väyrynen, 2003, p. 44). These territorial developments contribute to the emergence of new scalar configurations (Swyngedouw, 2004, p. 132), which can take the form of cross-border regionalization processes. In that sense, transnational political spaces can be understood as scales that encourage actors to skirt the traditional state-centred patterns of networking and to produce alternative perimeters of cooperation (Häkli, 2008, p. 475).

The Alpine case shows an interesting arena, where ecoregional experiences are taking the form of a particular “system of governing” (Bulkeley, 2005, p. 3). In the Alps, as in other geographical contexts, the concept of governance can be applied, given the variety of actors involved, with an important role played by non-state actors. They will be identified in this paper, explaining their specific roles. Prior to doing so, I will clarify how the concept of governance is intended herein, given the multitude of perspectives and interpretations of the term governance (Bulkeley, 2005, p. 3).

I will borrow the definition of governance provided by Bob Jessop in 1995. Jessop suggested that governance implies the methods that societies find to attain collective goals through a specific configuration of actors, involving “tangled hierarchies,” parallel power networks, or other forms of complex interdependence across different tiers of government and/or different functional domains (Jessop, 1995). From this definition, it is possible to say that, indeed, the Alps are building new institutional arrangements where forms of governance have been set up (Debarbieux, 2009a, p. 13). These allow Jörg Balsiger to think in terms of an Alpine ecoregional institutionalization (Balsiger, 2007, p. 4).

The national states constitute an undeniable important player in this reorganisation process. In 1991, the Alpine states signed the Alpine Convention, an international mountain ecoregional agreement. This date represents the first time that the Alpine arc achieves a common political and administrative structure (Norer, 2002, p. 8). Along with that, one could expect a redefinition of the territoriality of the Alps, so that the politics would correspond less to nation states and more to the regional scale (Church, 2010, p. 16). The European commission, in its operational programme approved in 2007, encourages the idea of more permeable borders, in order to develop shared strategies for sustainable development in the Alps. It states that the Alps are one common space, regardless of national borders and administrative barriers (European Commission, 2007, p. 10).

This paper focuses on pan-Alpine networks, another crucial actor in the reconfiguration of Alpine governance. These contribute to create new forms of expression for democratic legitimacy and accountability, following ecoregional boundaries (Balsiger, 2007, pp. 4 - 5). Local actors as managers of protected areas or Mayors of Alpine municipalities were and still are key persons for the effective functioning of these networks. The most important networks existing today in the Alps are *Alliance in the Alps*, a network of municipalities, the *Alpine Network of Protected Areas*, the *Alpine Town of the Year* and the *Network of Enterprise Alps* or NENA. All of these networks are being created to find an innovative way to anchor the principles established in the Alpine Convention at the local level. In fact, the Alpine Convention was criticized for being a “piece of paper” with no real implementation (Simonis, 1997, p. 13). So, the pan-Alpine networks were created to overcome this problem and to put into practice what the framework of the Alpine Convention promised: sustainable development in the Alpine region.

For all these initiatives, a key actor emerges: CIPRA. In fact, the Alpine Convention is the result of an extended preliminary work and lobbying done by the CIPRA (Fall, 2007, pp. 108-109), that first launched the idea of an ecoregional international treaty in the 1950s. CIPRA is, at the same time, the initiator and/or the reference point of a net of networks. Indeed, a non-governmental organisation, CIPRA, can be considered as the axis of the “new collaborative regional approaches and initiatives” (Price, 1999, p. 88) that are taking place in the Alps.

While asking the members of *Alliance in the Alps* for a possible reason why in the last two decades a considerable number of transnational cooperation networks were founded in the Alps, the role of the European Union appeared as being a crucial reason. The interviewees underlined, on the one hand, the idea that the establishment of the European Union encouraged the population of peripheral areas to “be more open” to new contacts and to new initiatives. On the other hand, some Mayors seem to see the necessity of these horizontal contacts in order to gain political weight in Europe:

“Diese Öffnung in Europa, die eigentlich in den 1990er Jahren schon lange in vielen Köpfen war, hat es notwendig gemacht [zusammenzuarbeiten], weil ansonsten die Kleingemeinden eventuell stärker unter die Räder gekommen wären“² (Austrian Mayor).

These accounts support the idea of Bernard Debarbieux and Gilles Rudaz who state that since “*Alliance in the Alps* is run by elected members who are also activists, it also aims to influence Alpine states and the European Union so that they strengthen their cooperation and take concrete steps to implement the objective of sustainable development in the Alps” (Debarbieux & Rudaz, 2008, p. 504). Doing so, they show that some members of *Alliance in the Alps* believe that the network can play an important political role, since they link its formation as an answer to cope with the power of the European Union. This is especially important, considering that some members judge that Europe does not consider the Alps as an important partner:

“Io ho l'impressione che non ci sia molta considerazione delle Alpi come regione importante, forse adesso c'è una convinzione, a causa del cambiamento climatico” (Italian Mayor).³

In that sense, the idea of building horizontal links between the Alps is seen as a way to give voice to the Alps in before the European Union. Nevertheless, the Mayors I interviewed do not agree on the actual capacity of the networks to assume this role. For some Mayors, this political influence exists already, for some others, it could be increased:

“[Die Netzwerke] haben noch ein sehr geringes politisches Gewicht” (Austrian Mayor).⁴

² Translation by the author: “This opening made it possible in Europe, what was already for a long time in the minds of people. This made it necessary, for small municipalities [to connect to each other], because otherwise the small municipalities would have been run over a wheel.” Interview of 14.06.2007.

³ Translation by author: “I have the impression that the Alps are not considered as an important region, maybe now, because of climate change, something is changing”. Interview of 06.07.2007.

“A travers les réseaux il y a quand même un certain poids qui se met en place. [...] Une certaine reconnaissance, très au début, de la part de l’Europe” (employee of Alparc).⁵

“Ich glaube wir [Kleingemeinden] hätten jetzt schon mehr politisches Gewicht, wir nützten es zu wenig aus” (Austrian Mayor).⁶

Whatever the opinion on the recognition of the Alps by the European Union, the latter undeniably plays an important role in this new configuration of regional actors. In fact, thanks to the Alpine Space programme and the money injected into INTERREG projects (now European Territorial Cooperation), a great variety of initiatives can be realized in the Alpine region. In that sense, the Alpine Space is a kind of “working room” of the Alpine Convention, an area where the principles of the Alpine Convention can be realized.⁷

3. Thinking local and pan-Alpine

The various protagonists of this “system of governing” (networked local actors, national states and non-governmental organisation) bring with them a particular scale of reference. Thus, the different territorial scales do not have the same weight in the dialogues of the persons I have interviewed. Active members and leaders often mentioned two territorial levels: the locality, or the small region around it, the valley, for example, and the Alpine arc. The national level seems hidden behind these two levels, and does not appear as an important identifier for the majority of the actors involved in the networking process. For the less active members of Alliance in the Alps, their space of reference includes almost exclusively only the small area where he or she lives and works:

“Es gibt Menschen, die machen das sehr gerne, die tauschen sich aus. Bei mir ist das eher so dass ich die Projekte, die ich gemacht habe in meinen dreizehn Jahren als Bürgermeister, dass waren Gehsteige von Ortsende bis Ortsanfang, und ein Ortskanal” (Austrian Mayor).⁸

This particular example, illustrates how some Mayors think on a big geographical scale, starting from the beginning of the village and finishing at the end of it. Nevertheless, as previously mentioned, the local is not the only scale that appears in the discussions with the Mayors I interviewed. The pan-Alpine level is also often mentioned. It is interesting to highlight the fact that the latter is evoked almost exclusively when the interviewees bring to mind the problems he or she faces as part of a small Alpine municipality.

The different actors are aware of being part of a “community of problems”, almost all of them being identified in socio-environmental terms. The concept of “functional space” forged by the political scientists Nahrath, Varone and Gerber can be useful in understanding the emergence of a space based on collective problems that calls the traditional institutional subdivisions into question (Nahrath, 2007; Nahrath, Varone & Gerber, 2009).

The interviews I led with members of Alliance in the Alps clearly show that one major interest in joining the network is the awareness that, wherever in the Alps, the problems are the same, compared to those of a small municipality located in the plain. The contrast is even more marked when they speak about big cities surrounding

⁴ Translation by the author: “[the networks] have, still, little political weight.” Interview of 14.06.07.

⁵ Translation by the author: “Through the networks, a certain political influence is put in place. [...] A certain recognition, still at the beginning, from Europe.” Interview of 09.10.2008.

⁶ Translation by the author: “we, small municipalities, could have already have more political influence, we do not use it enough.” Interview of 14.06.2007.

⁷ The expression “chambre de travail” (translated by “working room”) was used by Alexandre Mignotte in a conference that he gave the 28.04.2010 for the Master students at the Department of geography in Geneva. Course of Bernard Debarbieux, spring semester 2010, title: “Mountains: social images, planning and transnational governance.”

⁸ Translation by the author: “There are persons that enjoy doing it. They like to exchange. In my case, the projects I did in the last thirteen years since I am Mayor were pavements from the beginning of the village to the end of the village, and a water conduit.” Interview of 13.06.2007.

the Alpine region. In that sense, the promotion of exchange of experiences advocated by pan-Alpine networks is an illustration of the idea that the know-how achieved in one locality of the Alps can be useful for other localities, at the other end of the mountain range. This presupposes the awareness of living in a similar territory, where similar problems appear. By sharing the same problems, a feeling of solidarity is emerging:

“Man lernt die Probleme von den anderen Regionen kennen und im Prinzip sind sie ähnlich, mehr oder weniger” (Mayor of an Austrian municipality).⁹

“Il vantaggio di un'alleanza è che ti permette di riscoprire dei territori che erano partiti con gli stessi problemi e che li hanno risolti, questo è sicuramente interessante” (coordinator of a region, member of Alliance in the Alps).¹⁰

“Ich muss sagen, für mich ist das schon eine grosse Hilfe, dass ich weiss, dass viele Gemeinden mit unseren Themen auch zu kämpfen haben. Das bringt eigentlich schon viel. Nicht das ich weiss: ‘Ok, ich bin alleine, ich habe alleine mit dem Schutzwald da oben ein Problem.’ Und das bringt, das muss ich sagen, eigentlich viel” (Mayor of an Austrian municipality).¹¹

As we have seen, the new scalar configuration, made possible by the establishment of the Alpine Convention and of the pan-Alpine networks, influenced the dialogues of the protagonists of this reconfiguration. Interviewees, depending on their position and their involvement in the pan-Alpine networks, are strongly linked to their local environment and/or to the pan-Alpine scale. In this last case, the pan-Alpine area is often identified as a territory of shared problems. Although the national scale is hidden behind the local and the global level in the dialogues of the members of the networks, in the next section I will put forward the gap between what is said and how the networks are actually functioning.

4. Acting, still, nationally

The majority of the members seem, indeed, to be very closely linked to the local. They think about the pan-Alpine, when they evoke the “Alpine community of problems.” As I mentioned, the national level is clearly hidden in their dialogues. However, the national state remains present in different ways in the practice of the networks I have studied, as I will explain in the following paragraphs.

Some authors criticized how the establishment of the Alpine Convention was conducted. In particular, a lack of participation by the Alpine actors and a strong presence of the national states has been pointed out (Raffestin & Crivelli, 1992; Norer, 2002; Bätzing, 1994). Certainly, as these critics suggest, the state structure is imposed given the fact that the Alpine Convention is an international treaty. Still, once the Convention was signed and the delineation of the Alps established, the networks could have chosen a method of operation with less state interference. However, almost certainly for efficiency reasons, the organisational structure of the networks is strongly influenced by national considerations. Alparc states that “the missions of Alparc are defined by an International Steering Committee which is composed of directors of the Alpine protected areas, representing the diversity and number of protected areas by Alpine country” (Alparc, 2010). The so-called animators of Alliance in the Alps are organised following national criteria, along with linguistic factors; animators are individuals who support municipalities in setting up and implementing projects, establishing contacts between the different members of the network, serving as contact point between the network and the municipalities, and passing information

⁹ Translation by the author: “One learns the problems of other regions and, in principle, they are the same, more or less”. Interview of 14.06.2007.

¹⁰ Translation by the author: “The advantage of an alliance is that it allows you to rediscover some territories that started with the same problems and solved them, this is certainly interesting”. Interview of 06.06.2007.

¹¹ Translation by the author: “I have to admit, that for me it's a great help to know that many municipalities have to fight with the same themes, it brings a lot. I cannot say anymore: ‘Ok, I am alone, I am alone with the problem of my protection forest up there’. This brings, I have to admit, a lot”. Interview of 13.06.2010.

between the steering committee and municipalities. So, they are identified as being a representative of a country, but for example Switzerland has three animators, one for each national language, Italy has one animator taking care of the German-speaking members from South Tyrol. In the same way, the members of the steering committee of Alliance in the Alps are organized following the national logic: one country, one member.

Another interesting point is the decision, taken by Switzerland first, followed by Austria, to set up national sections within Alliance in the Alps. This structure has enabled these countries to benefit from funding provided by their state governments in addition to the subscriptions of members.¹² And, following Debarbieux and Rudaz it is a way for Alliance in the Alps, through its key players, to strengthen its position in any institutional meeting dealing with the Alps (Debarbieux & Rudaz, 2008, p. 504). However, although the autonomy of the networks does not seem under threat, certain choices are subject to pressure from the services that provide funding. In Switzerland, the Federal Office for Spatial Development has promised increased subsidies under the condition that the number of members increases (Personal notes, 15.06.2007). This condition, however, does not suit all the members and the leaders of the network, who are not unanimous about the necessity and the advantage of having more members (Del Biaggio, 2009, p. 109). In a certain way, the Federal Office is so pushing the Swiss members to following a certain type of development, not shared by all the other members.

At a more political and ideological level, policies promoting national interests sometimes take precedence over international considerations. Voting decisions during assemblies are occasionally based on partisan logic, defending more national than Alpine interests and following modes of functioning based on national diplomacy. This irritates some participants at events organised by the networks, as, for example, a representative of an Italian protected area who, at the General Assembly of Alparc that took place in Bled (Slovenia) in 2008, pointed out that the interests of the Alps go beyond petty politics (Personal notes, 10.10.2008).

The examples I have given support the idea that, despite the fact that the national level is not often mentioned by the interviewees, the administrative, political and ideological structures of the networks and their members do not completely detach from the national level. These examples support the considerations of Stéphane Nahrath about the emergence of “functional spaces.” In a recent article, he identifies a great capacity of resistance by the old administrative zoning in allowing functional spaces to build their own territories (Nahrath, 2007, pp. 170 - 171).

5. Conclusion

The Alps constitute, for a social scientist, a fascinating “laboratory”, where a great variety of actors with different interests are involved. They take possession of the Alps at different degrees and following different configurations. Introducing this paper, I said I would give elements to answer the issue raised by Häkli: are regional networks able to create spatially disembedded political formations and will policy-making divorce from the traditional territorial base (Häkli, 1998, p. 90)?

The aspects I have provided in this paper cannot clearly answer “yes” or a “no” to the question. As we have seen, different ways of speaking about the pan-Alpine project emerge. Some local actors are visibly anchored to their local reality, others think at the pan-Alpine level when mentioning problems linked to the mountain reality. Nevertheless, the capacity of playing and feeling comfortable at different scales is a quality that only few actors possess. The networks live thanks to some particularly active and enthusiastic members, who are difficult to replace (Del Biaggio, 2009, p. 102). This diminishes the impact of the project for the Alpine ecoregion to become a real political entity.

¹² According to the president of Alliance in the Alps, the creation of national agencies now provides increased financing for Alliance in the Alps. In the future, he thinks that this national level may enable an increase in political power (personal notes, interview with Cristina Del Biaggio and Bernard Debarbieux the 11.06.07).

The gap between the networks' dialogue and practice arises, if one analyses the role of the national states and of the European Union in the construction of the Alpine region. In this paper, I showed how these actors are still present in the regional institutionalisation process. The influence of the national and supranational levels can be seen, for example, in the organisational structures of the networks and in the composition of the steering committees.

This paper wanted to show the complex articulation of actors and territorial levels that has been envisioned and created in the Alps with the goal of building a sustainable ecoregion. The previous critical considerations do not mean that there is no potential for the Alpine ecoregion to become a "meaningful sociopolitical space" (Paasi, 2002, p. 138).

Acknowledgments

I wish to thank Bernard Debarbieux for the useful comments on the first draft of this paper and Gabriela Velásquez Orner, who accepted to correct my English. I also wish to acknowledge funding provided by the Swiss National Science Foundation (project "Pan-Alpine Networks: Analyse des réseaux d'acteurs et d'institutions à l'échelle des Alpes en rapport avec la Convention Alpine," 2006-09) and the Fondation Boninchi (project "Mountain communities in global and regional networks: History, objectives and functions of mountain community networks in the world since 1990," 2006-07).

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