

CALRE Working Group
Mountain and Inland Area Issues

2025 Focus

Economic Development, Combating Depopulation, and European Perspectives

Final Document

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ACCOMPANYING REPORT

1. Introduction: Mountains and Inland Areas as a European Issue

1.1 Mountainous and inland areas cover almost 80% of the European Union's surface area, home to 57% of the population. They contribute 46% of the EU's gross value added, yet their GDP per capita is only 70% of the European average.

1.2 In mountainous and inland areas, European peoples face common daily challenges, making it important to find dedicated strategies and policies.

1.3 Mountainous and inland areas are struggling to survive today and have a reason to exist, which lies not only in their rich cultural, social, and economic heritage, but also in their ability to inspire a life that follows a different pace from the ultra-fast pace of contemporary cities.

1.4 Their value lies in the body of knowledge found in traditional activities and sound land management policies, the endowment of natural and environmental resources that generate ecosystem services for all and that can be leveraged for local development and research, within a vision of balance between humanity and the environment.

1.5 Among the greatest difficulties is the demographic challenge, combined with the related phenomena of depopulation and population aging, which represents one of the most serious threats to the European Union.

1.6 Depopulation causes a reduction in services to citizens, market failures, reduced attractiveness for individuals and businesses, and administrative weakness of local governments, which is also reflected in the reduced ability to successfully participate in competitive tenders.

1.7 Neglecting these territories undermines the competitiveness and resilience of member countries, amplifying territorial inequalities and generating difficulties in the availability of labour, the sustainability of social and welfare systems, and access to essential services.

2. Isolated territories and economies at risk

2.1 The foundation of rural development is the identification of the cultural identities of communities and territories, in order to then promote traditional and other local initiatives and activities. Agriculture is the main economic activity in many mountainous and inland areas. It is characterized by extensive production systems, low inputs, limited yields, and high-quality products.

2.2 In this context, agriculture, and forestry as well, are key elements in the economic development of mountain and inland areas. They enable the preservation of historical customs and activities, as well as the valorisation of natural heritage, preserving the landscape, and striking the right balance between protecting traditions and the need for innovation and sustainability of products and processes.

2.3 Today, however, mountain agriculture is threatened by land abandonment, climate change, and the increase in wildlife and large carnivores.

2.4 In addition to agriculture, tourism is one of the main economic activities in mountain and inland areas, which benefit not only from the landscapes but also from the cultural identities of local communities. The most remote areas attract large numbers of visitors each year, drawn by the beauty of their natural sites, their rich cultural heritage, and the wide range of outdoor activities offered.

2.5 In some mountainous and inland areas, significant production facilities still persist, a network of large, medium, and small businesses that must be preserved with adequate investments and incentives, as they can act as a veritable "employment dam" to prevent the abandonment of mountainous regions, especially by young and highly qualified people. Remote working has also offered certain groups greater freedom to choose to remain or even relocate to mountainous and inland areas: this is a tool that must be promoted and encouraged.

2.6 To better understand these territories, a comprehensive data analysis is needed—on services, employment, and demographics—referring not only to the regional or provincial scale, but also specifically to the perimeter of mountainous and inland areas, in order to highlight the significant differences within individual territories.

2.7 It is also necessary to remunerate differently—through an ad hoc territorial coefficient—the public services provided by private entities in mountainous and inland areas, in order to offset the higher costs of provision resulting from the population type and the orographic conditions of the territory.

3. The arduous journey to define a European Agenda for Mountainous, Rural and Peripheral Areas

3.1 The European Parliament has long been concerned about both mountain areas and inland and peripheral regions.

3.2 With its Resolution of 10 May 2016 on cohesion policy in EU mountain regions, the European Parliament called on the Commission to develop an appropriate definition of mountain regions, relevant to cohesion policy. Considering that EU policies should include a specific approach to mountain regions due to their evident structural disadvantages, it reiterated that these regions require additional support to overcome the challenges of climate change, to provide annual and not just seasonal employment, economic development, prevention and management of natural disasters, and environmental protection, and to contribute to achieving EU objectives regarding renewable energy sources.

3.3 Noting that the EU lacked (then as now) any specific policy for mountain regions, Parliament called for an "Agenda for EU Mountain Regions." This would form the basis for an EU strategy for the long-term development of mountain regions and the areas dependent on them, and would also provide a framework for transnational, cross-border, and interregional policies.

3.4 With its subsequent resolution of 3 October 2018 on addressing the specific needs of rural, mountainous, and remote areas (2018/2720(RSP)), the European Parliament expanded its action, calling for the creation of a "European Agenda for Mountainous, Rural, and Remote Areas."

3.5 The Resolution, underlining the importance of rural, mountainous, and peripheral areas for achieving balanced territorial development in Europe, emphasized the need to strengthen them by addressing their specific needs through EU policies and the need for investments aimed at integrating rural, mountainous, and peripheral areas into all EU policies.

3.6 Since then, mountainous and inland areas have been the subject of debate, but no adequate regulatory responses have been found. Following the approval of the Resolution, the EU Commission has not acted on it, thus failing to pave the way for dedicated policies.

3.7 The conclusions proposed by the working group aim to reinvigorate a strategic vision for mountainous and inland areas by the European Commission, in order to uphold the values of community responsibility, territorial justice, and local freedom that are the foundation of our European tradition and identity.

4. The role of the Regions and their good practices

4.1 Regions play a key role in European politics as fundamental actors in implementing EU policies, especially through cohesion and regional policy, which invests millions of euros to reduce disparities, support economic growth, and create jobs. Furthermore, they play a role in addressing common challenges such as environmental and social ones, promoting civic participation, and representing local and regional interests in Brussels.

4.2 Testimonies from Working Group members confirmed that challenges are shared across Europe: depopulation, aging, lack of services, economic and environmental fragilities.

4.3 There are also good practices that embody the values of innovation and responsibility:

- 4.3.1 Emilia-Romagna: Strategie Territoriali (STAMI) che integrano sviluppo economico, welfare e cultura, con un modello partecipato e condiviso; cooperative di comunità.
- 4.3.2 Tuscany: 30% of EU funds earmarked for 2023-2027 for inland areas and the "Mountain Guardians" law, which recognizes those who maintain the vitality of the territory.
- 4.3.3 Autonomous Province of Trento: Incentives for housing redevelopment in villages, to bring life and families back to towns at risk of depopulation.
- 4.3.4 Lombardy: Extension of the National Strategy for Inland Areas with the identification of 14 inland areas within the region, with interventions financed through a mix of European (ERDF, ESF+), national, and regional funds; free energy monetization for areas with large hydroelectric diversions.
- 4.3.5 Trentino-Alto Adige/Südtirol: Law allocating an "Incentive for enrolling in supplementary pension plans for newborns": a pioneering measure at the national level.
- 4.3.6 Bavaria: Direct support for Alpine farmers and sustainable tourism with the "Mountaineers' Villages".
- 4.3.7 Cantabria and Madrid: concrete plans to combat depopulation, with a particular focus on young people, digital services, and quality of life in small towns.
- 4.3.8 Brussels-Capital: soft mobility, circular economy, and urban regeneration; solidarity between regions—urban and rural, inland, coastal, or mountainous—must be at the heart of the European project.
- 4.3.9 La Rioja: investments to combat depopulation (La Rioja Rural Youth Card, Revive Plan) and to support entrepreneurship and the rural world with tax breaks and increased decentralized services.
- 4.3.10 Abruzzo: transition from 5 to 7 regional Internal Areas with interventions financed by European (ERDF, ESF+), national, and regional funds; Call for proposals for urban regeneration, Regional Mountain Fund.

4.3.11 Thuringia: Integrated rural development, AGATHE (Aging in Community), Regional Law on Volunteering.

4.4 The examples above show how local authorities, if supported, can innovate and find long-term solutions.

5. The urgency of a strategic vision and European planning dedicated to the development of mountains and inland areas

5.1 The Working Group supports the need for timely intervention and shares the simple yet powerful principle that "It is better to invest early, with services and territorial protection, than to pay the high price of depopulation and abandonment later."

5.2 Urgent intervention is not a technical issue, but rather the expression of a strategic vision.

5.3 Investing early means guaranteeing services, opportunities, and dignity; conversely, paying later would entail having to address problems such as social desertification, environmental degradation, forced migration, and territorial marginalization.

5.4 The development of mountain and inland areas lays the foundation for fostering the future of a Europe of Regions.

5.5 Countering depopulation and supporting the development of mountain areas means not only defending European cohesion but also reaffirming the values that guide us. It means focusing on the responsibility of local communities, supporting those who choose to live, work, and protect the mountains.

5.6 This means reaffirming the dignity of the individual and the strength of self-governance of local and regional authorities.

5.7 The most feasible responses arise mostly from the regions and territories, not from top-down solutions.

5.8 It is therefore necessary to affirm the principle that the regions and their parliaments should be more involved in the European Union's decision-making processes, especially on issues that impact territorial development.

5.9 To date, on the contrary, the European Union has introduced a "new model" of governance for European public investments, which, starting with the 2028-2034 programming period, would be managed by the Member States. This would lead to centralizing the definition, programming, and implementation of interventions at the national level, to the detriment of the

territorial approach. A centralized governance model makes no sense when applied to a policy that is by its very nature territorial. The Working Group should promote a strong position on the future Cohesion Policy within national and European institutions, reaffirming the centrality of the regions and the system of local authorities as primary actors in its planning and implementation, together with the subsidiary role of stakeholders from the worlds of business, labour, and the social economy.

5.10 The Working Group reiterates that mountain and inland areas provide a valuable contribution to environmental and climate security and are a laboratory for the green and digital transition, as well as a cradle of identity, culture, and cohesion.

5.11 Therefore, they are not a minority entity to be protected, but a vital core for rethinking Europe's future.

5.12 To this end, the Working Group believes that the European Union should:

5.12.1 invest more in mountains and inland areas by allocating dedicated funds to these areas to support their development;

5.12.2 recognize the self-governance of local and regional authorities as a force for cohesion, guaranteeing them a central role in the planning and implementation of EU cohesion policies for the future;

5.12.3 elevate mountain and inland areas to the status of laboratories for the future;

5.12.4 treat mountain areas on an equal footing with peripheral areas recognized as inland areas in terms of support instruments;

5.12.5 Responsibly apply the principle of subsidiarity, particularly by limiting interventions, regulations, and bureaucratic efforts to the minimum necessary.

5.13 Step 1: A clear definition - The first step should be to clarify and harmonize the existing definitions of mountain areas and inland areas used in European programs to improve policy coherence. Stronger recognition would allow for more targeted funding and the development of policy instruments tailored to the specific needs of mountain regions and inland areas. The definition should be complemented by the development of mountain-sensitive indicators to monitor social, economic, and environmental trends in these areas and guide more targeted policy development.

5.14 Step 2: A European Mountain Pact (post-2027) - The Working Group supports the creation of a European-level framework that ensures consistent and comprehensive consideration of mountain territories in all European policies and programs after 2027, with a European Mountain Pact. This pact explicitly promotes the diversification of mountain tourism and recognizes the need to adapt ski-dependent economies to climate change in a socially equitable manner. And which encourages the transfer of lessons learned and good practices already in place in many regions through pan-European cooperation mechanisms.

5.15 Step 3: Achieving a Mountain Strategy Framework Directive - Prepare the first steps towards a Mountain Strategy Framework Directive (in parallel with the Marine Strategy Framework Directive) as a governance tool for the mountain system, promoting the adoption of complex strategies aimed at safeguarding mountain ecosystems and achieving Good Environmental Status. Furthermore, the use of mountain natural resources and ecosystem services must be sustainable, so that the structure, functions, and processes of the ecosystems that make up the mountain environment function fully and are able to maintain their resilience.

COMMITMENT TEXT

6. CALRE Action Proposal

6.1 The CALRE Working Group "Problems of Mountain and Inland Areas" proposes to the CALRE Plenary Assembly that the European Parliament and the European Commission adopt an agenda that includes a Development Strategy for Mountain and Inland Areas.

6.2 The strategy should focus on the following lines of action:

6.2.1 Give greater institutional and legal prominence to mountain and inland areas by:

6.2.1.1 Preparing and approving a European Agenda for Rural, Mountainous, and Peripheral Areas, as requested by European Parliament Resolution 2018/2720 (RSP).

6.2.1.2 Including inland areas among territories "with permanent structural disadvantages" (Article 174 TFEU)¹.

6.2.1.3 Adopting a single definition of mountain and inland areas in all European programmes to improve policy coherence.

6.2.1.4 Creating a European Mountain Pact to ensure consistent and comprehensive consideration of mountain areas in all European policies and programmes after 2027.

6.2.1.5 Preparing the Mountain Environment Strategy Framework Directive as a governance tool for the mountain system.

¹ TREATY ON THE FUNCTIONING OF THE EUROPEAN UNION (CONSOLIDATED VERSION)

PART THREE - INTERNAL POLICIES AND ACTIONS OF THE UNION

TITLE XVIII - ECONOMIC, SOCIAL, AND TERRITORIAL COHESION

Article 174 - (ex Article 158 TEC)

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

In particular, the Union shall aim to reduce disparities between the levels of development of the various regions and the backwardness of the least favoured regions.

Among the regions concerned, particular attention shall be paid to rural areas, areas affected by industrial transition, and regions which suffer from severe and permanent natural or demographic handicaps, such as the northernmost regions with very low population density and island, cross-border, and mountain regions.

6.2.2 Revitalize the economy of mountain and inland areas through:

6.2.2.1 The Working Group should promote a strong position on the future Cohesion Policy within national and European institutions, reaffirming the centrality of the regions and the system of local authorities as primary actors in its planning and implementation, together with the subsidiary role of stakeholders from the worlds of business, labour, and the social economy.

6.2.2.2 Confirmation and strengthening of Territorial Strategies for non-urban areas in the post-27 Cohesion Policy.

6.2.2.3 Promotion of slow tourism, crafts, and cooperation, protecting vibrant communities from abandonment and standardization.

6.2.2.4 Incentives for innovative manufacturing and short supply chains, supporting those who choose to live, work, and protect the mountains.

6.2.2.5 Promotion and incentives for the revitalization of villages to enhance the identity of these places, increase their attractive potential, and offer hospitality and housing opportunities.

6.2.2.6 Incentives for transformative innovation projects to address the typical problems of low-demand areas.

6.2.2.7 Incentives for full digital accessibility and remote working to ensure equal access to telecommunications networks and digital services.

6.2.2.8 Promoting differentiated and more favourable state aid legislation for initiatives undertaken in mountainous and inland areas characterized by market failure.

6.2.2.9 Developing projects (including experimental ones) in inland areas to develop new energy sources and access to the Internet.

6.2.2.10 Easier access to major regional highways, railways, and airports through public transport networks and services.

6.2.2.11 Compensation for the obligation to tolerate specific environmental restrictions in daily activities (protection of wildlife, forests, and mineral resources).

6.2.2.12 A European program to combat "new generation" megafires caused by global warming and drought.

6.2.2.13 A European program to finance housing affordability in mountain areas, preferably through the rehabilitation of old rural buildings and historical-ethnographic landscapes.

6.2.2.14 Development of specifically designed public service models in the areas of healthcare, education, and the elderly.

6.2.2.15 Develop an information unit within EU institutions on best practices in mountainous and inland areas and monitor the results and evolution of each policy.

6.2.3 Promote the macro-regional and transnational dimension by:

6.2.3.1 Strengthening the Interreg Alpine Space program and macro-regional strategies (EUSALP, EUSAIR, EUSDR, EUSBSR).

6.2.3.2 Creating cross-border pilot projects for shared services (health, education, digital).

Members of the Working Group

"Mountain and Inland Area Issues"