

Reopening futures of remote, depopulating Alpine areas – the pilot project ALPJOBs

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Strong imbalances in terms of job opportunities and supplied services are common issues across the Alpine region; where in the more remote areas such issues are amplified by the decline of population. A relevant part of the systemic problem are the young people (15-34 years) which generally go out of their villages for higher education or job and do not come back to (“brain drain”).

The pilot project ALPJOBs (2018-2020) aims to contribute to initiatives against depopulation in remote alpine areas focusing on future job opportunities and on social processes that can support them. The five project partners, from four countries, by using the selected methods derived from Futures Studies, try to answer to following open questions:

- how to involve young, entrepreneurs, labor agencies, local policy makers and interest groups in developing sustainable innovations of the local social economic system;
- how formal and/or non-formal and/or informal education system and vocational training centres could match competences required within year 2030 by regional enterprises and job seekers;
- how to promote the anticipatory governance in establishing and maintaining in the future attractive job opportunities, as well as enhance the resilience of local communities.

The pilot project is intended as a learning and testing experience for stakeholders without prior knowledge of future studies, with expected results at different levels in terms of:

- spread of competences in stakeholders and agents of change in Alpine remote areas on adaptation to the coming changes or orientation of local opportunities for the labor market and innovation;
- collection of insights and strategic indications for possible future-proof projects of local development in collaboration with the local communities;
- fostering the awareness of entrepreneurial and social actors on the importance of involving young people and building strategies for local development, looking at the medium-long term and the related uncertainties.

ALPJOBs project consists of training modules for partners on methods from future studies, and applications of these by the same partners in their territory. The chosen methods aimed at providing to learners an overview of methods of different difficulty, as well as at allowing them to collect a series of strategic information and insights useful for subsequent more operational developments.

Initially, the partners collected a series of socio-economic statistics to understand the territorial dynamics (local trends) and to recognize the coming changes. Subsequently, they identified the two uncertainties that most will likely impact their territory, based on these they then defined, in a simplified form, four strategic scenarios. In the third phase, by a systems thinking approach, the partners tried to identify the local territorial sub-systems and the processes capable to sustain (or hamper) innovation and job opportunities. In a fourth phase, the partners were introduced to the backcasting and roadmapping approach and applied these with local stakeholders interested in building strategies for local development.

The achieved results are interesting at two levels: process and content. The development of future exercises has encouraged the project partners to embrace a way of thinking about broader time horizons, to “think in systems” the local development objectives and related initiatives. The concepts of futures studies (such as strategic scenarios, relevant uncertainties, megatrends, feedback loops) have entered their vocabulary and that of local stakeholders involved in the applications.

The contents of these applications have some limitations due to structural factors (limited time and personnel resources) as well as contingent factors (inexperience about futures studies and prospective analyzes). The partners have translated the methodological indications into the language of their stakeholders for local

applications. The depth and detail of analyzes and of the “futures exercises” have a considerable room for improvement.

Nevertheless, overall, the project has allowed us to collect significant samples from different contexts of the Alpine region, including 61 strategic interviews, 10 local strategic scenarios, 8 workshops of “systems mapping”, 5 workshops of backcasting, 5 workshops of roadmapping, involving local groups of stakeholders in Slovenia, Austria, Switzerland and Italy.

Interesting insights emerged from information gathered on expectations, fears, promising processes and barriers to innovation, are useful for visualizing, in detail, the favorable local conditions for the development of job opportunities for young people in the coming years, in other words, the locally desirable futures.