

Pan-alpine networks : The case of *Alliance in the Alps*

Pan-alpine networks is a research project based, as its name suggests, on networks of actors in mountain regions. Specifically, it aims to understand why and how such actors choose to take mountain regions in general, or a particular mountain massif, as the shared frame of reference of their involvement. The project comes under the responsibility of the « Mountains: Knowledge and Policies» research team of the University of Geneva.

This document presents the mid-term results of a survey of the *Alliance in the Alps* network.

1. Objectives and research methods

Alliance in the Alps (AdA): the first ten years

The network of local authorities referred to by this name was founded in 1997 in Bovec (Slovenia) at the initiative of CIPRA and a handful of strongly-motivated Mayors. It brings together over 200 partners, who cooperate in order to “apply the Alpine Convention in favour of promoting sustainable development (SD) in the Alpine region”¹. This year the network celebrates its tenth anniversary, which represents an appropriate moment to take stock of its achievements. The present research is intended to contribute to such a process.

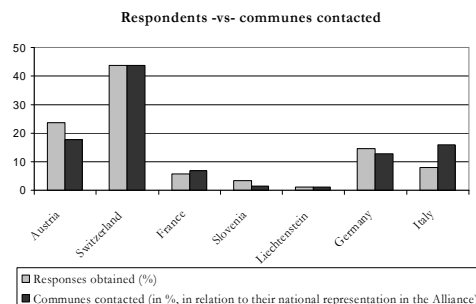
Methodology

The research has been conducted through three different research modes:

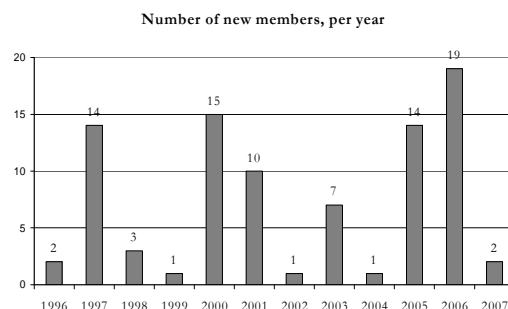
- Survey by **questionnaire** (258 copies distributed², with a reminder by telephone to all the local communes, yielding 89 usable responses, i.e. 35%);
- Open **interviews** (17) carried out essentially in two locations (Ticino/Switzerland and Grosses Walsertal/Austria) and targeting a variety of local actors: Mayors, regional authorities, organizers and leaders;

- First-hand **observation** and participation (General Assembly of AdA – Switzerland, Congress on the occasion of the 10th anniversary of AdA in Budoia and Bovec).

The proportional representation by country of the communes (local authorities) who replied is good, despite a slight under-representation of the Italian communes and a similar over-representation of the Austrian respondents:



The communes seem to have joined Alliance in the Alps in successive waves, in particular after the creation of the association (1997) and in the years 2000-2001 and 2005-2006:



¹ <http://www.alpenallianz.org/f/allianz.htm>.

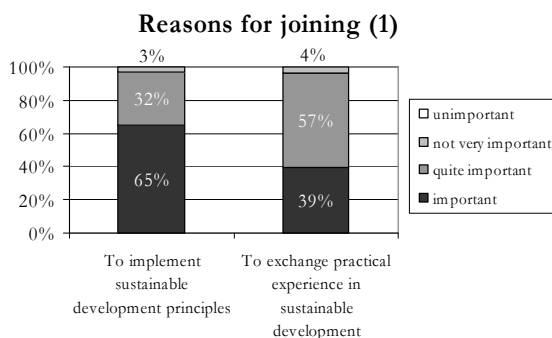
The questionnaire was sent to groups of communes (11 replies received), to the separate communes belonging to such groups (52 replies), and to the communes which joined AdA directly (25 replies), i.e. independently of any such groups.

2. Reasons for involvement

Replies to the question « *For what reasons did your commune join 'Alliance in the Alps'?* » are of several kinds and can be categorized as follows:

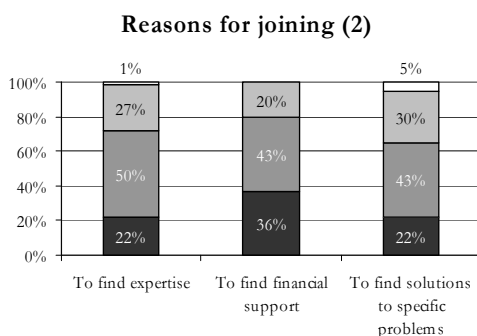
Joining the network in the original spirit

The main reason for joining was to promote SD and exchanges of experience between Alpine communes:



These two kinds of motivation **represent the original objectives of the association**; those of AdA are therefore clearly identified and supported by the members.

Practical reasons for joining

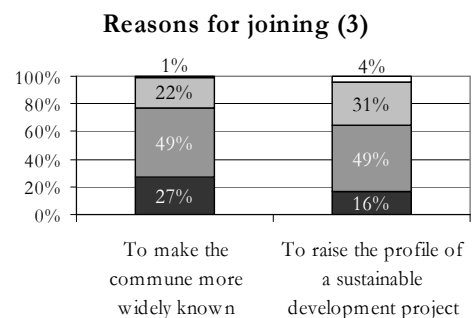


In comparison with the two main reasons which represent the spirit underlying AdA, the more practical reasons for involvement are

relatively less important: AdA is not mainly perceived as a provider of practical assistance, e.g. in technical consulting or financial support.

Cultivating an image

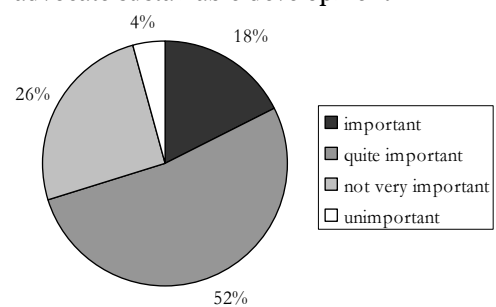
In some cases the wish to make the commune or group of communes more widely known is also significant:



Organizing a political pressure group

While the leaders of the association defend the idea that AdA should be a pressure group at the level of alpine and European states to promote SD in the Alps, its members themselves do not all feel equally concerned with this issue.

Membership to create a group, in order to advocate sustainable development



3. Modalities and forms of involvement in AdA

Its members have links with AdA of two kinds:

- a **direct link**, when the groups of communes and individual communes have joined AdA directly;
- or an **indirect link**, when the communes belong to a group of communes which has joined, without having done so directly themselves.

A project supported by a few activists or by thousands of inhabitants?

AdA is run by strong personalities, who are highly motivated and committed. Their contribution is an asset which ensures the proper functioning of the association, but whose presence conceals a danger: who will replace them, when they are no longer in charge of AdA or of their respective communes? Does not the personalization of AdA's activities constrain its ability to broaden the base of its membership?

75% of respondents state that they try to involve the local population in their SD projects. But this proportion is far higher in those communes which joined AdA directly (97%) than in those which are members through the group of communes to which they belong (53%). Interviews carried out with Mayors and with the leaders of the association show that the involvement of the population is perceived in very different ways.

Making different use of the network

While the priorities which motivated communes to join AdA are clear (page 2), the members are active to various degrees when it's a question of implementation: 38% of members state that they have no SD projects and only 30% of the communes say that they took part in Dynalp (the EU project Interreg IIB).

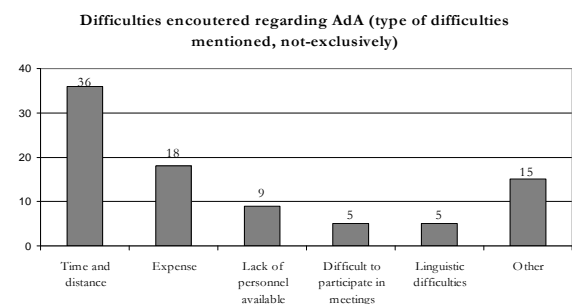
Whether or not they have concrete projects depends closely to the nature of the link with AdA: 84% of its direct members state having SD projects, as against 55% of others³.

The regional form of membership

Whether or not the members have a direct link with AdA is clearly a decisive factor in the level of intensity of their activity. Members with a direct link are more active and more strongly motivated than those which are members through a grouping of communes.

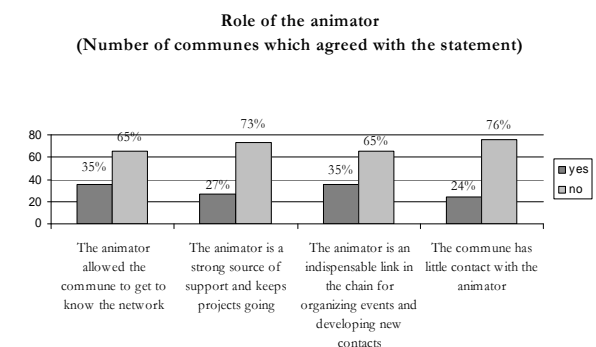
Difficulties encountered

Members mentioned several limitations applying to their involvement in the network; lack of time (and the distances to travel to locations selected for meetings), lack of financial resources and personnel available. The issue of language, however, was rarely mentioned.



The role of the animator

Members have a great deal of contact with the regional animators. While most respondents believe that the bridging role of those persons does not play a decisive part in their own involvement in the network, this does not apply to those who are most strongly motivated and stated during the interviews that they were very satisfied with the animators.



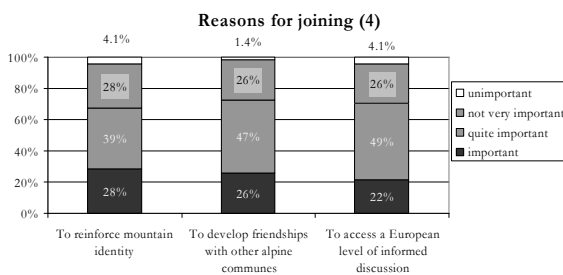
³ La relation est significative au seuil de 1%.

4. Identities and territorial policies

The Alps represent AdA's scale of reference for obvious political reasons: conceived originally as a conduit at the local, commune level for the concerns of CIPRA and the Alpine Convention, the association was supposed to share the same frame of reference. The nature and the intensity of this relationship with the Alps, however, is not the same in every case.

The Alps, one scale of reference among others

Among the reasons for joining AdA, accessing projects at the level of the Alpine geographical region as a whole appears to be relatively secondary, as does the opportunity to access a European level of discussion and to analyze the mountain identity of the population.



Many members continue to give priority to relations and common actions at the local or regional, or indeed at the national, level; leaders of Italian communes say that the point about AdA is essentially that it allows the alpine communes in Italy to get to know each other better. The communes which are most active, like Mäder and Budoia, are also those which combine the most varied forms and scales of involvement. Finally, there are many communes in the Alps whose inhabitants do feel alpine and who, here and there, are in a position to promote SD projects but who do not see the point of going through an association intended to put them in contact with communes which are far away and perceived to be very different. This is the main stumbling block for communes in France, where few have joined.

Identity in Alpine and mountain areas

The interviews also show that reference to the Alps is essentially driven by practical considerations: alpine communes are presented as having “common problems because they are all in the mountains”. Some, fewer in number, mention their “alpine identity” or “mountain identity”. For many elected officials, the wish to introduce their constituencies to a wider framework of discussion is more important than using the Alps as such as their frame of reference.

Insofar as they are perceived by AdA, and for most of the members of the association, the Alps therefore do not represent the frame of reference to which they could develop any great feeling of attachment, let alone the sole one.

*This research project was undertaken by Cristina Del Biaggio under the supervision of Bernard Debarbieux « Mountains: knowledge and policies » University of Geneva
www.unige.ch/ses/geo/Recherches/EquipeMontagnes*

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Bernard.Debarbieux@geo.unige.ch
Cristina.DelBiaggio@geo.unige.ch*



**UNIVERSITÉ
DE GENÈVE**

FACULTÉ DES SCIENCES
ÉCONOMIQUES ET SOCIALES
Département de géographie