

# **Reset Alpine Tourism**

**Impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic  
on Alpine tourism**

**Final Report**

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## **I. INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND**

Tourism, as one of the most significant economic sectors and the foundation of life for the people of many Alpine regions, has declined rapidly in the short term during the Corona crisis. The project Reset: Alpine Tourism addressed to question of what we can learn from this crisis for the future development of tourism but also for society as a whole when it comes to questions of resilience and our answers to the climate crisis.

The project contributed critically to the current discourse regarding the future of tourism. It brought together relevant tourism stakeholders to discuss climate protection and sustainable development in tourism. This exchange contributed to a transition towards sustainable, climate-friendly and resilient tourism in the Alpine Space, supported by holistic oriented financing instruments.

The report is based on official data from the countries or states, reports of tourism associations, think tanks, research institutes, as well as the outcome of the national focus groups and the webinars held in the light of this project.

## **II. ACTIVITIES**

### **2.1 Work Package 1 The Corona crisis and its impact on Alpine tourism**

The report for the first Work Package collects and analyses the impacts of the COVID19 pandemic on Alpine tourism. It is based on desk research in the different Alpine countries as well as at trans-national level. It shows the main impacts in the different countries and regions but also in the different touristic settings: summer and winter tourism, nature-based tourism, mass tourism, city tourism etc. The objective was to create a basis for further working steps in the project, e.g. the assessment of recent recovery strategies in the tourism sector in the different Alpine countries.

The country analysis for the Alpine region outlines how heavily the COVID crisis has impacted the tourism sector in each individual country. It clearly shows the dependency of this economic sector from external factors and underlines the importance of developing more resilient structures. When looking at different models we observe that mono-structures have been more affected, while tourism models based on nature have shown to be more resilient during the crisis.

In almost all Alpine countries, visitors have shown more interest in natural parks over touristic hotspots during the last two years. Crucial measures to guarantee sustainable development in these areas include visitor guiding, awareness building amongst new visitor profiles, as well as tackling waste disposal and mobility questions. Initiatives to address these problems have mostly been initiated from a bottom-up instead of a strategic approach by responsible institutions.

## 2.2 Work Package 2 (Economic) Strategies for Post-Corona Alpine Tourism

The second Work Package analysed measures of the different Alpine countries to address the challenges outlined in Work Package 1. The resulting report summarises the political and economic response strategies to the COVID-19 pandemic in the Alpine countries. It is based on the national reports from the Alpine countries as well as on trans-national and European studies.

The research has shown that on a national level few measures were specifically targeted at the tourism sector as most of the measures were focused on the economic sector as a whole. The measures rarely show green recovery dimensions or aspects, but mainly focus on the economic level and thus try to reduce the financial losses due to the pandemic. Overall, governmental policy measures could be more courageous and structured, while there is a universal call from national representatives to address the question of governance.

Based on the summary reports of WP1 and WP2 we have derived the following conclusions, hypotheses and key questions for the national focus groups.

- (1) During the COVID-19 pandemic, city tourism, winter tourism, large hotel complexes and tourist hot spots were particularly hard hit. In contrast, smaller and nature-oriented areas, rural areas and areas with a focus on summer tourism and smaller tourist units (e.g. apartments) were significantly less affected. Mono-structured tourism areas with a high dependency on overseas tourists are significantly more susceptible to the COVID-19 pandemic than regions with multiple pillars.
- (2) Throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, especially in the summer of 2020, foreign tourists were partly replaced by guests from within the country. Local recreation seekers from inner Alpine cities and from metropolises on the edge of the Alps also played a special role. This resulted in significant congestion in many small and rural tourist areas. Visitor management has become an urgent issue in many local recreation areas and will be even more important in the short and medium term.
- (3) The COVID-19 pandemic has led to increased demand for secondary residences and vacation homes. As a result, prices for land and real estate in rural areas have risen significantly. This represents a major challenge for low-income groups and young families in particular.
- (4) During the COVID crisis we could observe exciting innovations at the interface of tourism and regional development at the local and small-regional level, particularly in the area with food processing and services of general interest. Through cooperation between different sectors, efforts have been made to improve small-scale resilience.
- (5) During the COVID crisis, impulses for change towards sustainable and resilient tourism did not come from the tourism sector itself, but from external think tanks, experts and from bottom-up initiatives.
- (6) We can conclude that at this point in time (May 2021), the priority of policy measures is still on acute loss prevention. Given the severity of the crisis, the focus of measures is

on the present and not yet on transforming and diversifying the tourism sector to withstand future crises in a medium- and long-term perspective. Aspects such as environmental impact, climate friendliness or sustainability are almost completely ignored.

- (7) However, the questions of what the sector could look like in the future and what measures could be taken to transform it sustainably should be discussed NOW as the end of the immediate crisis approaches. COVID-19 will continue to have a far-reaching impact on the tourism sector long after the immediate crisis is over, and promotions that are no longer only aimed at survival should definitely have sustainability and resilience in their focus.
- (8) In view of the climate and biodiversity crisis and the political framework conditions and goals (Green Deal, climate neutrality, circular economy, nature-based solutions, capitalising on digitalisation), we must now set the course towards climate-neutral, participatory (better governed), sustainable and resilient Alpine tourism.

### **2.3 Work Package 3 Focus Groups and Workshops**

Following the reports of WP1 and WP2 the aim of the third chapter was to discuss the findings with national representatives of the Alpine countries. In a first round each country organized one or several Focus Groups with participants from tourism associations, municipalities or think tanks and research institutes amongst others. The focus groups included the different actors of the tourism sector as well as from neighbouring sectors in order to encourage an open debate and stimulate mutual understanding.

The main discussion points included feedback on the conclusions and hypotheses as outlined above:

- (1) To which of these conclusions and hypotheses did the participants agree – and which of them are most relevant?
- (2) To which of these conclusions and hypotheses did the participants disagree – and why? Which points were missing?
- (3) Which are the first steps to be taken on the transformation towards a climate-neutral, participatory (better governed), sustainable and resilient Alpine tourism

The national focus group provided important feedback from representatives “on site”, who brought additional value to the desk-based research from WP1 and WP2.

Importantly, participants stressed that situations can vary significantly for different regions and that measure have to be adapted accordingly. Despite these variations it has become apparent that the main stressors in tourism are similar across countries, however the resulting patterns can be very different: from empty skiing slopes to overcrowded peaks.

There is a call for developing the tourist sector together with local representatives to increase the acceptance amongst the population. In this light, new forms of tourism and new visitor profiles could be exploited as an opportunity rather than be seen a risk to regional development. It is vital to manage this transition in a comprehensive way.

All countries reported visitor flow management as an urgent and relevant issue. Diverging opinions appeared regarding the statement on mono-structured tourist hotspots and secondary residences: here situations vary for different destinations not only between countries, but also between regions. The difficulty with mono-structures rather depends on the orientation (winter, summer), guest segments (foreign, domestic), geographical location (cities). It is therefore vital to guarantee that decisions in this context are based on a valuable database and to adapt measures to local needs.

The concern that countries will adhere to conventional structures once the state of emergency is over, is shared amongst the national focus groups. Overall, governmental policy measures could be more courageous and structured, while there is a universal call to address the question of governance. Within this aspect countries demand a comprehensive transport strategy (mobility) and to put emphasis on identifying and integrating local actors.

### **III. POLITICAL WORK AND PUBLIC RELATIONS**

#### **3.1 Policy recommendations**

Based on the national focus groups and the transnational webinar several policy recommendations could be developed. Similar to Schuler and Pirchl-Zaugg (2021)<sup>1</sup> recommended policy actions can be sub grouped according to different criteria: (1) strategy and planning, (2) economic aspects and sustainable tourism offers, (3) local integration and welfare, (4) environment, nature and landscape (5) resource management.

##### **(1) Strategy and Planning**

- Governance and decision-making: analyse actors within the sector and define who is responsible on a national / regional / local level.
- Clearly define “sustainability” in the context of tourism (Alpine Tourism Policy). This could include labelling and certification regarding waste and water management on huts, national parks, etc.
- Foster the dialogue and communication of best practices across countries and regions.

##### **(2) Economic aspects and sustainable tourism offerings**

- Phase out subsidies/ funding for unsustainable projects and expand funding for tourism actors who are developing sustainably.
- Financing: link public funding to sustainable strategies.
- Introduce limits and regulatory measures regarding visitor numbers and access to protected areas. Carefully analyse how will people react to limits and plan communication strategies accordingly.

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<sup>1</sup> Schuler, Y., & Pirchl-Zaugg, Y. (2021). Nachhaltigkeit in Schweizer Tourismusdestinationen. Scuol: Tourismus Engadin Scuol Samnaun Val Müstair & ZHAW Zürcher Hochschule für angewandte Wissenschaften.

### **(3) Local integration and welfare**

- Foster cooperation and dialogue between local initiatives and national representatives (bottom-up and top-down): many good practices and transformational steps already take place at a local level or even with specific tourism players. At the same time regional and national representatives are working on tourism strategies. It is vital to provide a framework where these different parties are brought together
- Include the social aspect in the transition to more resilient tourism: improve working conditions in the sector, address problems of seasonal work, include local actors.

### **(4) Environment, nature and landscape**

- Specifically address new visitor profiles and tailor offerings to newcomers. This can include awareness building, informative campaigns or signposting amongst others.
- Develop a coherent strategy for visitor flow management in popular destinations such that conflicts between different interest and user groups are minimised.
- Address waste and water management in mountain areas. Minimize water and energy consumption.
- Address the problem of regional development in the context of rising real estate prices and increasing demand in secondary residences: the regional landscape should be preserved and further developed through tourism.

### **(5) Resource management**

- Mobility/ transport: guarantee environmentally friendly mobility by providing a comprehensive mobility and transport concept. Inform guests particularly about public transport to/ from the destination. Incentivize sustainable travel (make use of a reward system or nudging).
- Minimize water and energy consumption and support businesses in the transition.

## **3.2 Work Package 4 Public Relations and Political Work**

The wider public was informed about the results of the work packages one to three (WP1, WP2, WP3) through the communication channels of CIPRA International. An article on the topic was published in four alpine languages (German, French, Italian and Slovene) on CIPRA's website. Additionally, it was sent to the almost 20,000 subscribers of the alpMedia newsletter. The conclusions of the project have also been shared on CIPRA's Facebook and Instagram account.

In a first step, we created a simplified communication strategy with the following essential elements: communication-oriented SWOT analysis, target and dialogue groups, communication goals, core messages, channels and sender, communication events. Based on this, we create a concrete communication plan and implement the planned communication activities. Outputs: social media posts, media articles, newsletter-articles.

For political work the decision makers have been involved in the different focus groups. Additionally, we presented the results at the following working groups:

- EUSALP AG2
- Alpine Climate Board Meetings (Pathway tourism)
- Transfer of results to the Swiss Presidency of Alpine Convention

- Presentation at OECD-Conference “Green Growth for sustainable development”

#### **IV. CALL FOR PARTICIPATORY, RESILIENT AND SUSTAINABLE ALPINE TOURISM**

Tourism is a vital part of the Alpine region. The exchange in light of this project contributed to a transition towards sustainable, climate-friendly and resilient tourism in the Alpine Space. The platform fostered a dialog between different stakeholders, collected pending issues in the sector and provided the basis for exchange.

In order to maintain its relevance and improve the ecological and social footprint of the sector in the long term, tourism needs more holistic and integrated approaches. The suggested policy recommendations (see Pt. 3.1) provide the basis to develop measurable targets and strategies in Alpine tourist destinations.

The past years have shown rising awareness regarding sustainable development across all sectors. The pandemic shifted this view: from a voluntary demand of sustainable development to an indispensable necessity. In order to guarantee long-term resilience of the sector we need a participatory process within this transformation.

In the discussions during the national focus groups as well as in the trans-national exchange it became very clear that especially the link between the tourism sector and regional development plays a crucial role. When developing tourism strategies and regional development strategies all regional key actors should be involved in participatory settings. This can be done e.g. in the structural funds such as INTERREG or LEADER in upcoming programme period 2023-2027.