

REPORT OF THE THIRD EUROPEAN MOUNTAIN CONVENTION : A CONTRIBUTION TOWARDS THE INTERNATIONAL YEAR OF THE MOUNTAINS

The European Mountain Conventions

The European Mountain Conventions are an initiative of the European association Euromontana which comprises agricultural organisations, communities, research institutes, development and environmental agencies or mountain associations with a strong interest in rural and sustainable development of mountainous areas. This network of organisations covers about 15 countries in all the European mountain massifs, facilitating therefore a co-operation between Western, Central and Eastern Europe. Among the other projects of the association, these Conventions represent special times for gathering together, clarifying issues in a deliberately open and wide debate .

European Mountain Conventions are organised every 2 years for the attention of professionals and aim at ensuring in relation to the general theme of **mountain rural sustainable development** :

- Updated **information** on current European issues and their impact on mountain areas
- Open **consultations and exchanges** between representatives of different countries and different types of organisation
- The extension and **strengthening of a European network** of co-operation for mountains, beyond the network of Euromontana member organisations.

The context of the Third European Mountain Convention : Inverness 2002

The Third European Mountain Convention took place within the framework of a special context :

- *2002, International Year of the Mountains*
- the first stages of preparation of **important reforms of the European policies** for agriculture and for regional development, related to the enlargement of the Union which will be transformed from a group of 15 Member States to a group of 27 member states in the coming years.

This Convention was strongly focused on the preparation of these reforms. Taking place at an early stage of the reflections, the programme concentrated on the organisation of prospective debates, the identification of different perspectives, reports of innovative studies and experiences, the consultation of experts and high representatives of the European institutions including Michel Barnier, the Commissioner with responsibility for regional policy.

The Convention gathered about **230 participants from more than 20 European countries**, with a **balanced representation** between countries and between the different types of organisations. The event also benefited from the presence of numerous elected representatives from the regional, national and European levels. This level of participation represented in itself a positive indication of the recognition of the importance of the European Mountain argument.

Debates / current European issues for the mountain areas

Firstly, the Third European Mountain Convention focused for an important part of the programme on issues related to the reforms of the EU policies.

- **The future of the Common Agricultural Policy and the issues for European Mountain agriculture.**

The Common Agricultural Policy (implemented in the 15 current member states of the European Union) is described as comprising 2 "pillars" :

- one "pillar" for the supports to markets, the most important in terms of budgetary endowment and corresponding in particular to the direct payments to farmers to support their production
- one "pillar" for rural development corresponding nowadays to the agri-environmental measures, pre-retirement or notably to the specific compensatory payments for mountain farming, among other measures.

As Mr Sivenas - the Director for rural development of the Directorate for Agriculture of the Commission representing Franz Fischler, the European Commissioner for Agriculture - explained, a timeframe for reforming this policy is planned : a "mid-term review" in 2002 of the measures programmed for the period 2000-2006, and a reform in 2006 for the following period 2007-2013.

Several factors can influence these changes :

- the enlargement of the European Union (negotiations with the candidate countries, the conception of an agricultural policy which applies in all EU countries in the medium term)
- the WTO negotiations and the pressures for a reduction of the supports for production,
- and, Society's expectation of agriculture related to costs, food security and the environment.

It is very likely that one of the changes will be an increase of the second pillar (the measures for rural development) perhaps related to a decrease of the first pillar (supports to production). Already the transitional measures which apply in the candidate countries mainly address rural development and will continue to address rural development with 50% of the budget during their first years of membership.

In this context, mountain agriculture can either have threats or opportunities. The Inverness Convention was focused mainly on the opportunities notably by exploring the following themes which could be the subject of a stronger attention from the European Union and the European States in general :

- **Quality products**, which represent an obvious strategy for mountain products which can never be mass products at low prices. Euromontana already initiated a 2-year study on this theme to explore ways to better add value to and promote mountain quality products at the European level. The Convention facilitated a sort of preliminary consultation on this programme more specifically related to the CAP aspects.
- **The recognition of the positive externalities of mountain agriculture.** This theme is very exploratory insofar as the evaluation of the "externalities" of agriculture (its

effects on landscapes, on the rural community, on the maintenance of services, on tourism attractiveness ...) has still not found a satisfactory methodology. Works undertaken in Switzerland or more recently in Scotland brought useful insights on this theme but reflections should be undertaken to really identify how best to quantify and remunerate these indirect effects of agriculture which are extremely precious and so much valued by Society.

- **The stimulation of local dynamics** and the improvement of the efficiency of intra-regional co-operations in mountain rural areas. While this theme is obviously relevant to all sorts of territories, it appeared clearly that mountain areas more than other areas can and must rely on strong local co-operations in their strategy. The success stories, the measures to support these positive processes should continue to be explored for mountain areas, notably through specific projects of exchanges of experiences and of international cooperation.
- **The synergies between the maintenance of natural resources and the economic activities in mountain areas.** This theme remains a major concern in the European mountain territories, characterised by their rich natural resources and in particular by their **renewable resources** and their **forests**. The particular theme of mountain forestry and its role in the rural development was developed thoroughly on the occasion of a specific workshop on Saturday 18 May, comprising field training very illustrative of both the problems and the local solutions.

- **The future of the European Regional Policy and the issues for the mountain territories in Europe.**

The Convention benefited from a long intervention by the European Commissioner for Regional Policy, Michel Barnier, and from a vigorous discussion session with him.

The current European Regional policy consists in structural supports allocated according to a few Objectives :

- Objective 1 : supports to least developed regions (regions with a GDP less than 75% of the EU average GDP). This Objective benefits from the most substantial level of aid and is distributed towards administrative regions.
- Objective 2 : supports to industrial areas, fragile rural areas, areas dependent on fishing, urban areas and mixed areas. The zones identified for this aid are much more narrow than for Objective 1.
- In addition to the Objectives, there are 4 "Community Initiatives", EQUAL, URBAN, LEADER and INTERREG, this latter supporting for example the co-operation between regions and applying also in the candidate countries and non member states such as Norway and Switzerland.

This policy is bound to be reformed in 2006, with the integration of new member states, creating new regional disparities within the Union. The scenario currently being promoted by Commissioner Barnier is the following :

- The maintenance of a prior and substantial support to least developed regions (being then located mainly in the new member states)
- The maintenance of supports for other types of priorities, being chosen by the member states from a list or 'menu', predefined by the Commission, and which could comprise for example : territorial priorities such as the urban areas, the industrial areas under reconstruction, fragile rural areas, **areas with permanent natural and geographical**

handicaps, and thematic priorities such as cooperation between regions, the new economy and knowledge society, sustainable development and networks.

All this of course needs to be approved by the member states and these are only proposals.

Nevertheless a window of opportunities appears for the mountain areas, which are among the "areas with permanent natural and geographical handicaps" together with the islands and the sparsely populated areas (the Nordic areas in particular). One of the challenges to address in order for this recognition to become effective is to achieve a better quantification of the specific problems of mountain areas.

The Convention has contributed to these reflections in 2 main ways :

- Firstly, by presenting the results of a pilot study aiming at quantifying the socio-economic characteristics of European mountain regions
- Secondly, by inviting the participation of scientific and elected representatives of the islands and the sparsely populated areas.

As regards the first point, this **study** was launched with the recognition of the need **to better quantify the socio-economic characteristics of mountain areas** to justify their specific support in the European policies. This study has been extremely useful, perhaps less for its raw statistical results than for the fact that it precedes a bigger study commissioned by the European Commission itself. It has been possible to highlight the advantages but also the defects of a statistical analysis and a certain number of statistical anomalies and methodological difficulties have been identified that could provide a useful guide for the following study which will be carried out by the European Commission.

As regards the second point, the Convention was a new step in what could be described as an **"alliance" between the territories with natural and geographical handicaps**. This alliance is firstly necessary simply because if the concept of "durable natural handicaps" fails to be recognised by the Commission or the member states, the mountains, the islands, or the sparsely populated areas would have many difficulties, individually, to obtain a recognition of their territory without the recognition of the others. But beyond this assessment, it is extremely interesting to exchange views with the representatives of these areas who also developed strategies, methodologies or evaluations to attempt to demonstrate their predicament. Thus problems of delimitation, quantification, interpretation of statistics were raised together with them in a new perspective for mountain actors.

- **Other themes and events of the Third European Mountain Convention**

In addition to the exploration of the issues related to the reforms of the EU policies, other important themes for the rural development of European mountain areas were addressed.

- For the first time in the European Mountain Convention, the specific theme of **cultural identities** was the subject of an individual innovative workshop, dealing with the topic in the context of a sustainable rural development allowing the valorisation of cultural heritages.

- **The environmental policy** was also the subject of a specific session, scrutinising notably the 6th Framework Programme for Environment of the EU, but was of course also a consistent concern in the other sessions.
- **Mountain Forest and Forestry**, were addressed at various stages of the conference, always in a rural development perspective.
- **The role of national policies**, which of course remains very important even for the EU countries.
- An intervention of Douglas MacGuire from **FAO similarly** highlighted the European mountain issues **in a more global context**, and provided a reminder of the opportunities of the *International Year of the Mountains*.

The Inverness Convention also offered the possibilities for meetings and visits, the impacts of which should not be neglected :

- **discovering Scottish mountains**, real and big, for all those who had never been there before, notably through the impressive welcoming video, the speeches made by the senior representatives of the sponsoring organisations and the Scottish Ministers, and especially through the extremely well-conceived field visits always including demonstrations of best practice and meetings with professionals or elected representatives.
- **a better knowledge of the different national strategies**, notably through the interventions of high representatives of the Bulgarian, French, Greek or Basque Governments and the notable participation of the Vice-Prime Minister of Slovakia, Mrs Maria Kadlecikova.
- **a meeting with Members of the European Parliament**, opening a dynamic debate, very stimulating for future concerted actions with MEPs sensitive to the areas with permanent geographical handicaps.

Follow-up actions

- As regards the reforms of the European policies

A legacy of this Convention will be a series of consultations on the development of the reflections on the future of the CAP and the regional policy. The objective will be to achieve by the middle of 2003 a concerted contribution of Euromontana, or a broader network if possible, highlighting the needs and opportunities of European mountain areas for the years to come.

One step to remember in this process is the seminar of the European Commission on the mountain areas organised in Brussels on 17 and 18 October this year. For the first time, as a celebration of the International Year of the Mountains, Commissioners Barnier and Fischler and the President of the Commission Romano Prodi will dedicate a seminar entirely on mountain issues.

Euromontana plans to organise a seminar in May or June 2003 to take stock of the different consultations carried out between now and then.

- For the co-operation between mountain regions

The debates opened at the Inverness Convention, notably on prospective themes such as the evaluation of the positive externalities of land use, should be continued in particular in the form of direct and concrete exchanges between mountain actors. Co-operation projects or studies should be launched at every possible opportunity in the same way as Euromontana did for the mountain quality products, with the preparation of a project within the Vth Framework Programme for Research and Development or with the project under preparation on services and land management within the framework of Interreg IIIC.

Numerous proposals were formulated in the workshops or in the conclusions, which all represented an encouragement for immediate further actions.

A contribution towards the International Year of the Mountains.

Even if the issues and reflections developed at the Third European Mountain Convention may seem very specific to the European Union or to the future member states, the concerns in these countries for mountain rural development are very similar to those from other European Countries and even from other continents. Only the political solutions differ and this is precisely why it is of great interest and added-value to exchange and co-operate. It is in this perspective that Euromontana works at the same time with partners from the European Union, from Switzerland, Norway, Central Europe, the Balkans or even oriental Europe, all of which have different political solutions to address their mountain issues.

Euromontana is therefore confident that the Third European Mountain Convention is a key specific European contribution to the International Year of the Mountains. The full results will be disseminated widely and Euromontana will be available to provide any further information on the conference or on the themes of the conference.

In a few weeks, most of the interventions at the conference will be available from the web site www.euromontana.org.