

CALRE Working Group

Problems of Mountains and Inland Areas

Year 2025

Final Report

Premise

Mountain and inland areas have significant added value, stemming from the combined knowledge passed down through generations, the protection of traditional activities, and sound land management policies, in a vision of balance between humanity and the environment.

However, in mountainous and inland areas, European peoples are increasingly struggling to survive, facing shared daily challenges. It is therefore important to develop dedicated strategies and policies.

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

Introduction

European Historical Situation

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

With its Resolution of May 10th, 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, rather than seasonal, employment, economic development, prevention and management of natural disasters, and environmental protection, and to contribute to achieving EU objectives regarding renewable energy sources.

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 aimed at achieving 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.

With its subsequent resolution of October 3rd, 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."

The Resolution, underscoring 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.

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 failed to act on it, failing to pave the way for dedicated policies.

Current Situation

Current European mountain policies focus on sustainability, resilience, and equal opportunities, but a dedicated and coherent European policy is still lacking to secure specific funding, tailored governance, and legislative recognition for vulnerable mountain areas, particularly in the face of climate change, which is altering landscapes, water resources, and biodiversity, and to support local life and the economy.

In the current situation, it is not only climate change that highlights the need for renewed attention to mountain areas, but also the socioeconomic vulnerability of these territories and their communities, which has led to a strong demand for the "right to remain" in mountain areas and the possibility of ensuring equal opportunities and services compared to cities. In this context, a lack of an integrated approach is evident, with fragmented European policies.

Inner areas, defined by their distance from centres offering basic services (municipalities or unions of municipalities), and therefore in relation to territorial marginalization, have emerged strongly as potential locations for investment and development. This should be triggered through a strategy capable of reversing the process of depopulation and marginalization that characterizes these areas, leveraging two key economic policy assets: improving personal services and triggering local development processes.

The development perspective of inner areas therefore cannot ignore a long-term territorial vision and scenarios.

Many processes and methodologies, including geographical ones, enable the identification and assessment of local cultural heritage with the aim of assessing the economic-territorial system's ability to adapt to new contexts while preserving its resources. In this type of analysis, territorial diversity takes on the role of the main variable in environmental assessment, in turn a means and instrument with which to address the current period of stagnation and crisis, generating diverse and original competitive, polycentric, sustainable, and cooperative geographical-economic models.

The Working Group

The CALRE Regulations provide that the Plenary Assembly may "establish working groups (...internal or with other associations and/or institutions...) aimed at deepening and exchanging views on topics of common interest. (...)

Participation in meetings may take place in person or remotely, provided that telematic means are available for conducting the meeting, including telephone or videoconferencing, the identity of the participants, the content of their statements, the duration of their statements, as well as real-time interactive transmission solutions and the provision of adequate communication media for the entire duration of the session."

The idea behind the Working Group's proposal on "Problems of Mountain and Inland Areas" stems from the unique characteristics of the region represented by coordinator Roberto Paccher, Trentino-Alto Adige/Südtirol. This region, characterized by the presence of various linguistic minorities, is recognized as 100% mountainous. Furthermore, several Inland Areas are recognized within it, located in both its constituent provinces, namely the provinces of Trento and Bolzano. This characteristic makes Trentino-Alto Adige a perfect field of study, not only for the dedicated policies that have been created and implemented over time, but also for assessing the evolutionary dynamics of the region and the communities that live there, in a context of fragility and delicate balances.

ESTABLISHMENT AND STRATEGIC OBJECTIVES OF THE WORKING GROUP

The establishment of a CALRE Working Group focused on mountain and inland issues stems from the intention to share experiences, best practices, and effective policies, promoting cooperation between different regions with mountain and inland areas in order to foster a fruitful dialogue.

The group also aims to be a tool for raising public awareness and the relevant authorities regarding the need to implement targeted policies to support mountain, inland, and peripheral areas and the communities that live there.

THEMATIC OBJECTIVES OF THE WORKING GROUP

Since the working group's inception, the need to focus on multiple areas relevant to the territories under study has been assessed, identifying four elements as thematic objectives. These themes, while deeply interconnected, can be addressed through dedicated work to better understand their role in the territorial context of the study.

These are:

- Environmental sustainability and natural resource management
- Economic development of mountainous/inland areas, with particular attention to agriculture, tourism, and issues related to coexistence with large carnivores
- Improving the quality of public services, transportation, and roads
- Policies to combat depopulation and enhance local culture and traditions.

Environmental Sustainability and Natural Resource Management

The mountain environment is rich and unique; it encompasses numerous natural resources to be enhanced through agriculture and forestry, as well as numerous Natura 2000 Areas to be protected. Mountain nature is exceptionally rich, and mountains constitute Europe's ecological backbone, water reserve, and green lung. However, mountain nature is also threatened by the effects of global warming and various human pressures. It is therefore necessary to continually develop better tools for sustainable development and protection of the mountain environment, as well as to properly recognize the ecosystem services that mountains provide to society as a whole. As institutions, we will seek the best solutions to preserve the territory entrusted to us, enhance its sustainable development, and restore it where it has been neglected. Increasing the environmental resilience of mountain and inland areas means helping the communities that live there grow in harmony with their surroundings.

Economic development of mountainous and inland areas, with a particular focus on agriculture, tourism, and issues related to coexistence with large carnivores.

Rural development is based on identifying the cultural identities of communities and territories, thus promoting 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. In this context, agriculture, along with forestry, are key elements in the economic development of mountainous and inland areas, enabling the preservation of historical customs and activities, as well as enhancing the natural heritage and maintaining the landscape. Today, however, mountain agriculture is threatened by land abandonment, climate change, and the increase in wildlife and large carnivores. As a working group, we will seek to highlight common elements that will lead to a concrete proposal for a Common Agricultural Policy that firmly supports the sustainable development of mountain and inland agriculture.

Besides agriculture, tourism is one of the main economic activities in mountainous areas and several inland regions, 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 (sometimes

expressed in various dialects and minority languages), and the wide range of outdoor activities offered. The Working Group therefore also aims to promote the exchange of knowledge on sustainable tourism models that contribute to the prosperity and resilience of mountainous and inland areas.

Improving the quality of public services, transportation, and roads

Mountainous and inland areas offer an unparalleled living environment for local communities. However, the natural constraints of these areas raise issues regarding mobility, access to healthcare, employment, and village vitality. The provision of services and infrastructure for mountain and inland populations is also key to bringing people and businesses back to these often-at-risk areas. Connectivity challenges are linked to local contexts, which often make infrastructure investments more costly, and mountain and inland areas are often overlooked when it comes to developing mobility or digital services. Digitalization is now more crucial than ever for bridging the gap between urban and peripheral areas, as well as for attracting young professionals and new forms of entrepreneurship. The Working Group intends to explore these specific challenges in order to develop shared proposals to support the socioeconomic development of mountain and inland areas and increase their attractiveness.

Policies to Combat Depopulation and Promote Local Culture and Traditions

Mountain and inland areas are highly diverse. While some regions are attractive, benefit from a diversified economy, and offer a wide range of public services, others are suffering from demographic decline. Many areas are facing depopulation, the exodus of young people, and an aging population. Depopulation creates a vicious cycle that undermines the attractiveness of the region and the maintenance of local services and the local economy. By losing control of the territory, entire cultural heritages and invaluable historical identities are lost. Mountain and inland areas, however, should be and remain places where people can live and work with a good quality of life. The Working Group, sharing an awareness of the specific challenges these areas face, will work to exchange experiences between regions to find innovative solutions to depopulation and explore new opportunities for regional attractiveness. Territorial cohesion must ensure that none of these areas are left behind.

WORKING GROUP OPERATIONAL METHODS

The working methods of the "Mountain and Inland Areas Issues" Working Group include the exchange of documents and best practices, as well as online and in-person meetings, including visits to the Group's member territories.

During the Working Group's various meetings, each participant can speak in their own language, and interpretation is provided in the individual languages of the members.

The documents produced are prepared in both Italian (the coordinator's language) and English.

To encourage maximum participation of members, even during the in-person meetings, videoconferences are available during the meeting.

ORGANIZATIONAL METHODS AND FIRST-YEAR AGENDA

The first-year activities included three meetings between all members, to begin getting to know each other and begin the initial phase of sharing their experiences.

The first working focus for 2025 was "Economic development of mountainous, inland, and peripheral areas, with particular attention to agriculture and tourism." In preparation for the first meeting (June 24th), the coordinator offered some ideas for further exploration, on which participants were invited to contribute during the meeting.

Thanks to the contributions of the Group members, a draft document was prepared to engage the European Commission and Parliament on key issues related to the working focus.

In the second half of the year (October 16th-17th), an in-person meeting was organized in Italy (in the province of Trento) to not only continue relations between the different regions but also to finalize the preparation of the draft document to be presented to the CALRE Plenary Assembly.

On that occasion, the Group met with representatives from the research community and the Committee of the Regions, working on issues related to the year's focus.

After an amendment phase for the final document, a third meeting was held at the end of the year (December 2nd), via videoconference, to approve the final text, which will then be submitted to the CALRE Plenary Assembly for approval and forwarding to the Commission and the European Parliament.

Towards an Integrated Strategy for Mountain and Inland Areas

Thanks in part to the efforts of various local groups and stakeholders, an awareness of the challenges facing mountain and inland areas has developed within the EU, with a pressing call for a shift from sector-specific interventions to a dedicated European policy for these territories, with dedicated funding and specific governance to address climate change and ensure socioeconomic development.

The working group has addressed many of these requests throughout its work, recognizing the importance of developing an integrated strategy for mountain and inland areas at the European level, with coordinated policies for the most decentralized territories, often considered marginal.

These requests were incorporated into the final document of the working group's first year, with a proposal to be presented to the CALRE Plenary Assembly, inviting the European Parliament and the European Commission to adopt an agenda that includes a Development Strategy for Mountain and Inland Areas, broken down into various lines of action.

The final document, approved on December 2nd, 2025 and attached to this publication, will be presented to the Standing Committee and the CALRE Plenary Assembly, which will meet in Tenerife