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MULTI-LEVEL GOVERNANCE OF SPATIAL PLANNING FOR ECOLOGICAL CONNECTIVITY IN THE ALPINE REGION: EVIDENCE FROM THE ITALIAN REGIONS WITHIN THE SCOPE OF THE ALPINE CONVENTION

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Abstract

Research question: the paper addresses the challenge of identifying a governance model and instruments for sustainable spatial planning in ecologically sensitive areas storing natural capital assets and delivering ecosystem services to a wider region. In particular, it analyzes an institutional context where multi-level competences are found (regional, national, EU, international), a part of the area is subject to an internationally binding agreement (the Alpine Convention) and a new territorial governance structure is being introduced (EUSALP)

Abstract: Within the European Spatial Development Perspective (ESDP), Member States and Regional Authorities are called to achieve the common goals stated by the Europe 2020 Strategy. The Territorial Agenda 2020 (TA2020) identifies the loss of biodiversity, vulnerable natural, landscape and cultural heritage as one of the six challenges and potentials for territorial development.

Since environmental policies have the most direct effect upon development activities in European regions (e.g. links between spatial development and land use patterns, protected areas, etc.), the ESDP clearly states that spatial development can play an important role in the conservation and sustainable use of biodiversity at local and regional level.

ESDP compliant innovative strategies are then expected to be able to harmonise nature protection and spatial planning, to integrate protection and management of the endangered areas and fragile ecosystems into spatial development strategies for wider areas, setting up sustainable management mechanisms and approaches especially in sites storing significant natural heritage and natural capital assets.

Within this framework, the contribution focusses on a set of site-based experiences developed in mountain areas, especially in the Italian Alpine and surrounding peri-alpine regions, where the coexistence of natural resources of high ecological value and urbanised and fragmented areas has to be managed with integrated development strategies and adapted planning concepts.

The Alpine region constitutes an interesting test site since it couples a long-term cross-border cooperation on spatial planning for ecological connectivity in terms of short and medium-range projects with a well-established formal regional institutional processes. The latter assumed a particular regional salience since 1991 on the occasion of the opening to signature of the Alpine Convention, and later with its Protocols (in particular: Spatial planning and sustainable development; and Conservation of nature and countryside-however also other Protocols show significant references to ecological and planning aspects) and thematic groups (Working Groups and Platforms: in particular on ecological connectivity). More recently, the EU Strategy for the Alpine Region (EUSALP) has introduced the even more demanding task of identifying the ecological relationships and mutual

functional, social and economic dependencies between mountain sites and ecosystem services and the benefits enjoyed by the wider regional territory, including large metropolitan areas.

Based on the analysis of TA2020 and the Protocol of “Spatial Planning and Sustainable development” of the Alpine Convention, the paper describes the recent activities carried out by the Italian Alpine regional governments and other institutional actors jointly with the Italian Ministry for the Environment aimed at enhancing regional ecological connectivity starting from Alpine protected areas and assessing the benefits deriving for the outer territories from a proper implementation of an extended Alpine ecological network.

In particular, institutional arrangements and governance methods are discussed that have been partially tested for fostering a local, regional and trans-regional dialogue, spreading knowledge on ecosystem services and introducing “green economy” perspectives for mountain sites. The institutional arrangement of a voluntary “*Coordination Board*” open to external stakeholders between protected areas managers and competent regional and national authorities will be described together with the emerging synergies of this governance method with the Alpine Convention system, the EU level and the new EU Strategy for the Alpine Region (EUSALP).

The paper refers to regional experience with spatial planning for ecological connectivity in Lombardy and Veneto Regions in the Italian Alps, in particular concerning the challenge of harmonization of spatial and territorial plans for the Alpine area and some major needs and blunders to regional integration and the setting up of an effective multi-level governance system (e.g. exchange of data, territorial mapping systems, governance issues, etc.). A few recommendations from recent experience are drawn based on research projects and institutional advice.

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