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Framing Mountains for Regional Environmental Cooperation: The Case of the Carpathians

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1. Introduction

Mountains have traditionally been the objects of local and national politics. They have been the target of various policies in different fields, such as agriculture, spatial planning, tourism, or nature conservation. Over the last two decades, a large network of scientists, non-governmental organizations and mountainous countries have promoted the cause of mountains on the global agenda (Debarbieux and Price 2008; Rudaz 2011). In this sense, the 1992 Rio Conference was an important step in the recognition of mountains on the international stage. The adoption of a specific chapter for mountainous regions – Chapter 13 within the Agenda 21 – recognized for the first time that they deserved international attention and required the implementation of specific sustainable development policies. In 1998, the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA) declared that 2002 would be the International Year of Mountains (IYM). A number of events, research and reports were launched to this end. Still in 2002, an international partnership for sustainable development in mountainous regions was launched during the World Summit on Sustainable Development (WSSD) in order to facilitate direct coordination and cooperation between the interested states and various stakeholders (Debarbieux and Price 2008: 154).

Financially supported by the Swiss Development Cooperation (SDC), scientific cooperation on mountains has also been institutionalized progressively and globally.

Following the adoption of Chapter 13, a first review of the implementation of the Agenda 21 in mountainous regions was published in 1997 (Messerli and Ives 1997). An international research partnership has been implemented (Mountain Research Initiative) and regional scientific structures have been developed in different parts of the world. The definition of mountainous areas rapidly came to be seen as a challenging but necessary task for the scientific community in order to organize data, analysis and communication globally (Debarbieux and Price 2008: 157). With the development of remote sensing techniques, the UNEP World Conservation Monitoring Centre has been able to propose a global classification which has largely been taken up by international institutions since then (Kapos et al. 2000).

This growing globalization of political and scientific mountain issues has been accompanied by the launch of several regional initiatives which identified mountain ranges as a relevant management field of action. This political objectification of mountain ranges (e.g. mountain ranges as a relevant object of politics) has been concomitant to the evolution of paradigms in the field of nature conservation, from the protection of species to the integrated management of ecosystems. New models (ecoregions, bioregions, hotspots) have progressively been developed and promoted by international non-governmental organizations. They have reorganized nature conservation around the identification of these new management

areas. The World Wide Fund for Nature (WWF) has, for instance, identified 238 priority ecoregions¹ (the so-called “Global 200”) on which to focus its action on (Olson and Dinerstein 1998). Mountain ranges have also been the object of ecoregional initiatives. In 1997, the Yellowstone to Yukon Conservation initiative (Y2Y) developed a wide network of protected areas on the whole mountain range. Other political initiatives, mainly in Europe, started to develop coordinated integrated policies at the scale of mountain ranges (Debarbieux and Rudaz 2010). This is the case in the Alps where an international convention was signed in 1991 to promote sustainable development policies at the Alpine scale. This is also the case in the Carpathians where a framework convention for the protection and sustainable development of the Carpathians (the Carpathian Convention) was signed in 2003 following the Alpine model. This is precisely the modalities of environmental regional cooperation around the Carpathians that we wish to study in this paper.

Over the past fifteen years indeed, several initiatives have identified the Carpathian mountain range as a relevant spatial frame to implement transnational environmental policies. This paper shows that these initiatives have mainly been driven by international governmental and non-governmental environmental organizations guided by different interests. We demonstrate that the framing of these Carpathian projects has varied from spatial, thematic and organizational perspectives to their degree of institutionalization. Nevertheless, they are more and more directed towards the implementation of

coordinated sustainable development policies. Lastly, we argue that these various projects articulate well under the banner of the convention for three main reasons. First, the Carpathian Convention succeeded in combining development objectives with nature conservation from the very beginning. Second, the various international organizations active in the Carpathians have developed specific skills in a rather complementary way. Third, the Interim Secretariat of the Carpathian Convention (ISCC) played an active role in coordination and monitoring of these various initiatives.

This paper is divided into three parts. In the first part, I briefly introduce the Carpathian mountain range in its European context. I highlight the environmental challenges and the role of the European Union in this regionalization process. In the second part, I discuss three regional initiatives driven by three different organizations active in the environmental field: the Carpathian EcoRegion Initiative (CERI, formerly CEI), the Carpathian Convention and the Carpathian macro-regional strategy. Each of these initiatives has identified the Carpathian mountain range as a relevant spatial framing to implement their policies but with rather different modalities of framing. The third part briefly opens up avenues with respect to the articulation of the various initiatives and the role of the interim secretariat (ISCC).

This paper is based on information gathered during a three-year period of research, more specifically three months of participative observation on daily operations of the ISCC (Vienna), and on several interviews with officials of the ISCC, United Nations Environment Programme Regional Office for Europe (UNEP-ROE) and the WWF Danube-Carpathian Programme Office (WWF-DCPO).

¹ WWF defines “ecoregion” as “a large unit of land or water containing a geographically distinct assemblage of species, natural communities, and environmental conditions” (WWF 2013).

2. The Carpathians in the Wider European Context

The Carpathian Mountains is one of the largest mountain ranges in Europe. It covers areas in seven countries of Central and Eastern Europe (CEE): the Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland, Romania, the Republic of Serbia, Slovakia, and Ukraine. The largest part of the Carpathians is located in the territory of Romania. The highest points culminate between 2,500 and 2,700 meters. The Carpathian Mountains were relatively underdeveloped and preserved from human influence during the communist period. A large portion of the range is covered by forests and the Carpathians are known for their rich biodiversity and their large community of big mammals, especially large carnivores (UNEP 2007).

The end of the communist era in the late 1980s resulted in an abrupt economic and political transition, which has raised a number of issues for nature conservation in the region. A number of international non-governmental environmental organizations (INGEOs) have rapidly identified the potential of development for their activities in a region with striking natural characteristics but low economic capacity, a political apparatus in reconstruction and a relatively weak civil society. During the 1990s, the region has seen an increasing deployment of international environmental institutions searching for new opportunities of development (Carmin and Hicks 2002; Carmin and VanDeveer 2004). NGOs like the WWF, Friends of the Earth or the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) opened new offices and started to implement environmental programs. New financial mechanisms and capacity building institutions (like the Regional Environmental Center, REC), most of them supported by the European

Union (EU), were created during this period.

In the 2000s, EU accession perspectives (the Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland and Slovakia entered the EU in 2004, Romania in 2007, and the Republic of Serbia officially applied for EU membership in 2009) have profoundly influenced environmental policies of these states. EU accession requires the harmonization of laws, rules and practices with what is commonly termed the *acquis communautaire*, the whole body of European Union laws. Environment is one important chapter that must be transposed into national law. This was undeniably an important incentive for the Carpathian states to improve their environmental policies.

In parallel, the European Commission has encouraged regional initiatives of cooperation through regional cooperation programmes (INTERREG). Since 1997, a specific section of these programs has concerned transnational cooperation, particularly in the environmental field. The Carpathian region benefited from one of these rounds of funding in the implementation of the Carpathian Convention.² Regional environmental cooperation in the Carpathians must therefore be placed in its wider economic and political context. Different factors help us to understand the specificities of regional cooperation around the Carpathian mountain range: the end of the communist era, economic development, the strong presence of international

² The Carpathians were originally part of one of the thirteen spaces of funding identified by the European Commission (CADSES: Central Adriatic Danubian and South Eastern European space). During the fourth programming period 2007-2013, the Commission proceeded with the reorganization of these financial spaces and divided the Carpathians into two distinct entities (Central Europe and South East Europe).

environmental institutions and of external financial mechanisms, and lastly, the political and financial role played by the EU. In the next section, I will briefly introduce the three regional environmental initiatives selected and discuss their respective framings.

3. Framing the Carpathian Region

3.1. The Carpathian Ecoregion Initiative

The WWF has been the first international environmental organization to develop a specific program throughout the entire Carpathian region. Through its Danube-Carpathian Programme Office (WWF-DCPO) in Vienna, the organization launched the Carpathian EcoRegion Initiative (CERI) in 1998. The CERI is a partnership of 50 organizations (governmental and non-governmental, academic and scientific) from the seven Carpathian countries, which are committed to promoting conservation and sustainable development in the Carpathians. The program endorsed the ecosystem approach as the primary framework for actions and promoted the concept of “ecoregion” to spatially define the Carpathians entity. The Carpathians were the WWF’s first ecoregional experience in Europe. The Carpathian ecoregion stretches beyond the Carpathian Mountains and includes the adjacent foothills.

Between 2000 and 2001, a detailed assessment of biodiversity and socio-economic aspects in the Carpathian region was carried out thanks to several expert meetings and the institutionalization of a large network of environmental actors. Following the assessment, the CERI adopted long-term objectives and an action plan for the conservation and sustainable development of the region. Although the program officially endorsed a sustainable development perspective, it

was mainly based on nature conservation objectives.

Based on CERI’s activities since 1999, the WWF-DCPO, in cooperation with the Romanian government and the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP), organized in April 2001 an inter-ministerial Summit on Environment and Sustainable Development in the Carpathian and Danube Region in Bucharest. The Bucharest Summit provided international recognition for the WWF ecoregion program and increased governments’ interest in the region. It launched the process that led to the adoption of the Carpathian Convention.

3.2. The Carpathian Convention

The Carpathian Convention process has been mainly driven by UNEP. UNEP’s interest in the Carpathian region was closely linked to the declaration of the International Year of Mountains (IYM) in 2002. The UN program promoted the development of regional conventions as part of its overall strategy for the IYM (Gaberell in press). At the request of the governments of Armenia, Kyrgyzstan and Ukraine, the UNEP-Regional Office for Europe (UNEP-ROE) launched the European Mountain Initiative, which provided an umbrella for three regional projects around mountain ranges in the Carpathians, the Caucasus and in Central Asia. After the first phase of consultations with different governments involved in these initiatives, the UNEP-ROE formally assisted and facilitated the consultation and negotiation processes towards the development of regional convention for the protection and sustainable development of these mountain ranges.

After a very short round of negotiation between 2001 and 2003, the Carpathian Convention was signed in Kiev in November 2003 by the seven Carpathian

countries. The Convention supports the protection of the environment and the sustainable development of the Carpathian region. It was quite clear from the first informal meeting in 2001 in Kiev that the governments would not support an approach focusing exclusively on biodiversity. The governments were worried about hindering economical development in the region by over-emphasizing the need for nature protection. The experts rapidly crafted a framework agreement, which provided a general umbrella for an integrated approach including a wide range of topics. Sustainable tourism, biodiversity protection and sustainable economic development were identified as priorities for action. The specific thematic areas of cooperation in the Carpathians had to be further specified by the Conference of the Parties (COP) through the adoption of future protocols.³

Interestingly, the Carpathian Convention does not have a formal spatial delimitation. Despite the common political will to focus on mountainous areas, the negotiators failed to spatially define the boundaries of the region (Fall and Egerer 2004). The Convention therefore applies to “the Carpathian region, to be defined by the Conference of the Parties” (Art. 1).⁴ No agreement has been reached yet. This example demonstrates how the translation of a global definition to national contexts should not be conceived as a straightforward process. Instead, the identification and delimitation of these natural entities always entails processes of

³ Three protocols have already been adopted: the biodiversity protocol, which went into force in 2010, as well as the forest and sustainable tourism protocols, which were adopted in the third Conference of the Parties in 2011.

⁴ The Carpathian Convention.
<http://www.carpathianconvention.org/text-of-the-convention.html>.

translation, appropriation and negotiation between the actors involved.

The Carpathian countries also failed to agree on the administration and location of the permanent secretariat. As a result, an interim secretariat has been in service since 2004 by the UNEP-ROE in an outpost office located in Vienna. In order to carry on this task, the UNEP-ROE is assisted by the European Academy of Bolzano (EURAC), which sent two of its members to help in project making and to develop new partnerships.

3.3. The Carpathian Macro-region

Since 2007, a new tool of territorial cooperation has been developed by the European Commission: the macro-regional strategies. These tools for good governance are based on large territorial areas that however have no precise delimitation. They require no new funding, no new institutions and no new legislation (Samecki 2009). These strategies have been perceived as coordination tools in order to promote integrated policies and a better articulation of the different spaces of actions within the same perimeter. The first macro-regional strategy has been developed for the Baltic Sea region, which had a long tradition of regional cooperation particularly in the environmental field (VanDeveer 2011). The European Union Strategy for the Baltic Sea Region (EUSBSR) was rapidly followed by a macro-regional strategy in the Danube region. The broadly admitted spatial extent of the EU Strategy for the Danube Region encompasses the Carpathian Mountains.

This new instrument has rapidly been perceived by the Interim Secretariat of the Carpathian Convention (ISCC) as a means to bring the Convention closer to the EU. It was a way to better integrate the Carpathians into the wider European

political and financial regional system, either by the development of a new Carpathian strategy, or by a better integration into the Danube strategy. In 2009, the ISCC published a first strategic document, Visions and Strategies in the Carpathian Area (VASICA 2009), which called for the implementation of a “Carpathian space”, a wider area than the Carpathian mountain region, into the upcoming European territorial cooperation programming period 2014-2020. The “Carpathian space” spatial area included the main capitals concerned, Vienna, Budapest, Bucharest, etc., which were seen as major engines of regional economic development, and the full territories of many subnational regions, in order to facilitate the involvement of their respective political authorities (Gaberell and Debarbieux submitted). A strategic action plan towards a macro-regional strategy for the Carpathians was then produced in collaboration with the European Association of Elected representatives from Mountain Regions (AEM). Its scope was largely based on the VASICA report. It was formally presented at the third Conference of the Parties in June 2011 and a working group has specifically been dedicated to discuss this issue in depth.

4. Discussion

This brief overview allows us to highlight three initiatives that have taken the Carpathian mountain range as a relevant scale to implement transnational integrated policies. Each one has framed the Carpathians in a very different manner, as summarized in Table 1. This comparison leads to several observations that I wish to sum up here. First, environmental regional cooperation in the Carpathians has mainly been driven by a network of international institutions. The European Union, despite not being directly implicated in these

initiatives, played a major political and financial role in this regionalization process. Second, thematic framings seem to move from purely conservation objectives to include broader sustainable development issues. This thematic move seems to be performed through the enlargement of the Carpathian Mountains’ perimeter to include adjacent metropolitan areas in cooperative efforts. Softer forms of cooperation are also being researched.

These initiatives were articulated in a complementary way under the most institutionalized form of regional cooperation (e.g. the Carpathian Convention) for three main reasons. First, from the beginning the Carpathian states have been very careful to balance conservation and sustainable development priorities. The Carpathian Convention offers them a large framework of cooperation to include all the different interests in the region.

Second, every leading organization has developed specific complementary skills. The WWF-DCPO has a strong field presence and has institutionalized a large network of local and regional stakeholders. It is also recognized as a science-based organization with a long history of nature conservation. The WWF-DCPO works closely with the Convention on implementation of specific projects. Conversely, the UNEP-ROE has benefited from the intergovernmental status of its institution to drive the negotiation of the Carpathian Convention. It also has a long history of treaty making and is involved in a number of regional environmental treaties in Europe and across the world, which ensures privileged contact and partnerships for the Carpathian Convention. The UNEP-ROE is also administering the Secretariat of the Carpathian Convention on an interim basis

and opened a dedicated office in Vienna for this task. Lastly, the ISCC has structured a large network of scientific and political international institutions, which has helped to establish the Carpathian region into the European regional map. The ISCC has also developed a small office specifically focusing on project making to foster the implementation of the Convention. In this respect, it works closely with the WWF-DCPO and its network. Lastly, the macro-

regional strategy and the Convention are driven by the same actor, UNEP-ISCC. The organization has kept the definition and the implementation of the two-level strategy in its own hands, conceiving them in a rather complementary way. It contrasts with the Alpine process, where at least three different macro-regional projects are under consideration and two of them have been explicitly at odds with the Alpine Convention.

Table 1: Regional Environmental Cooperation in the Carpathians

Framing Initiatives	Spatial	Thematic	Organizational	Degree of Institutionalization
CERI (1998)	Ecoregional	Conservation	WWF-DCPO	Network of scientific actors and non-governmental organizations
Carpathian Convention (2003)	Mountains	Conservation and sustainable development	UNEP-ROE and the nation states party to the treaty	International treaty
Carpathian Macro-region (2011)	Carpathian Space	Sustainable development	The macro-regional process is encouraged by the European Commission at the European level; the Carpathian strategy is driven by the ISCC	Action plan

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The Great Mountain Game: Regional Governance in Central Asia

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1. Introduction

In the early 1990s, Central Asia was a region at the periphery of the former Soviet system that had just collapsed. However, the region came back strong on international political agendas for two key reasons: energy (and to a lesser extent mineral resources) and the “war against terror” initiated in the post 9-11 era. The new states emerging from the dissolution of the USSR had to redefine their cooperation at the regional level. They also entered the international political arena and came on board with the simultaneously emerging global agenda promoting sustainable development. In this latter context, specific attention was devoted to mountains and this resonated specifically with the Central Asian region.

In this paper, I focus on sustainable development strategies in relation to mountain areas and their resonance at the regional level. I discuss the three main ways regional cooperation has been conceived in relation to sustainable mountain development. First, I address the core regional issue of transboundary management of water, where mountains are conceived as water towers. Second, I consider the positioning of Central Asia towards the global mountain agenda, i.e. an agenda for mountains elaborated at the international level. Third, I discuss the process of up-scaling local initiatives promoting sustainable mountain development.

Because international actors play a decisive role in these processes, I picked the title “The Great Mountain Game” in

reference to “The Great Game”, which is the name given to the rivalry between the British and Russian Empires to extend their influence within the region, a rivalry that extended for about a century, between 1813 and 1907.

2. A Brief Overview of the Region of Central Asia and Its Mountains

Central Asia is a vast region with blurred borders extending between the Caspian Sea and China, and between Afghanistan (AF) and Russia (RU). With the collapse of the USSR, the region has come to be defined as the area covered by the five republics of the former Soviet Union: Kazakhstan (KZ), Kyrgyzstan (KG), Tajikistan (TJ), Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan, and it is this latter definition that I am going to refer to. These five republics emerged less than a century ago (1924) out of the former Turkestan Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic established in 1918. These borders were drawn along ethnic lines by Joseph Stalin, at the time Commissar for Nationalities. This delineation based on ethnicity explained the presence of territories in other countries, called “mountain enclaves” (Hughes 2012: 47). During the Soviet era, they drew little attention, but with independence, they persisted and led to more tensions.

With the collapse of the Soviet system, the region has faced major changes, mainly the transition from a planned to a market economy, as well as a change in political organization with feeble attempts to promote democracy. In an enthusiastic publication (2009) about Central Asian

countries, the EU Council stated that “They have established statehood, safeguarded multi-ethnic understanding and inter-religious communication. By joining the OSCE, they have subscribed to the Organization’s values, standards and commitments. By signing the United Nations Millennium Declaration they have set themselves ambitious goals”. However, it is hard to generalize statements for Central Asia as a region. The newly independent states of Central Asia took very different paths in styles of government and arrived at different political systems. However, strong concentration of power in the hands of a political elite remains the trend, with the notable exception of Kyrgyzstan (Roy 2005). The Central Asian countries also took different economic paths. Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan benefit from capital flows related to their energy resources, while Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan face continued economic difficulties.

With independence, there was a shift from one centralized system to five independent states. The collapse of the USSR did not reinforce regional cooperation. On the contrary, nationalism has been reinforced since independence (Roy 2005). International organizations try to stimulate regional collaboration, like the United Nations Special Programme for the Economies of Central Asia (SPECA) launched in 1998 and which aims to strengthen subregional cooperation in Central Asia and its integration into the world economy. Regarding sustainability, the Interstate Commission on Sustainable Development in Central Asia was created in 1994. It launched an Action Plan (2001), a Framework Convention (2006) and a Strategy (2007-2008), all aimed at promoting the sustainable development of the Central Asia region.

Focusing specifically on mountains, when one looks at the region overall, mountains cover about 20% of Central Asia, i.e. 800,000 km². When one looks at the country profiles, we come to the following statistics: 93% of Tajikistan, 90% of Kyrgyzstan, 20% of Uzbekistan, 10% of Kazakhstan, and 5% of Turkmenistan are mountainous (Hughes 2012: 18). We can see that Tajikistan and Turkmenistan have almost inverse percentages. The mountains of Central Asia comprise not a single mountain range but several. Two of Asia’s major mountain ranges are the Pamirs in Tajikistan and the Tien Shan in Kyrgyzstan. Mountain ecosystems also cover parts of Eastern Kazakhstan (Kazakh uplands, Djungar Alatau, Tarbagatai and Altai), southeast Uzbekistan (Western Tien Shan and Gissar) and Turkmenistan (Kopet-Dag and Kugitang), and extend into Afghanistan (Hindu Kush) and China (Eastern Tien Shan and Pamir). Several are transboundary: Djungar Alatau (KZ, RU), Tarbagatai (KZ, RU), Altai (KZ, RU, China), Tien Shan (KG, CN, KZ, UZ), Pamir-Alai (TJ, KZ, AF, CN), Gissar (UZ, TJ) and Kopet-Dag (UZ, Iran) (Hughes 2012).

3. Mountains, the Water Towers of Central Asia

At the regional level, the core issue is water. An administrative and technical matter during the Soviet period, water management has become a central political matter since the independence of the Central Asian republics. Indeed, the political volatility of Central Asia is highly related to water usage and its distribution among countries. The Environment and Security Initiative (ENVSEC), a joint initiative by a number of agencies (UNDP, UNEP, OSCE, NATO, UNECE and REC), has launched initiatives to reduce these tensions.

The mountains of Central Asia play the

role of water towers, a classical framing of the mountains (Debarbieux and Rudaz 2010). About 90% of the water of Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan comes from the mountains outside these countries. At the heart of the tensions between highland and lowland countries are the issues of energy accessibility and water usage for irrigation. Lowland countries need water during the summer for agriculture irrigation, while the upland countries release water in winter for energy generation through hydroelectric dams. During the Soviet times, things ran more smoothly as one centralized system was coordinating the water allocation and energy provision.

One of the things for which Central Asia is best known in the field of environment is the Aral Sea crisis, one of the most famous examples worldwide of water resource mismanagement. In the 1960s, the two major rivers feeding the Aral Sea (Amou Daria and Syr Daria) were diverted to irrigate cotton fields, making Uzbekistan one of the world's biggest producers, and some agricultural production (rice, melons, cereals). About 90% of the river flow has been diverted for irrigation. By 2007, the Aral Sea was 10% of its original size. But this environmental disaster extends far beyond the sea, due to the salinization being spread throughout the whole region by winds.

To address the Aral Sea crisis, there was a call for regional cooperation. The Agreement on Cooperation in the Management, Utilization and Protection of Interstate Water Resources was signed in 1992 by representatives of the five Central Asian states. The agreement calls for the coordination of efforts to address the issue. It established an Interstate Commission to implement the agreement and it proposes annual plans for water allocations. One year after the agreement,

the five countries signed the Agreement on Joint Actions for Addressing the Problems of the Aral Sea and its Coastal Area, Improving of the Environment and Ensuring the Social and Economic Development of the Aral Sea Region. The new agreement led to the creation of the Interstate Council for the Aral Sea, which is the coordinating body, and the International Fund for the Aral Sea, which is the implementing body and is considered a "key regional player in water and environmental cooperation" (Hughes 2012: 92). It works on the scale of the entire Aral Sea Basin and its motto "From the glaciers to the deltas"¹ shows the interlinkages between upstream and downstream. The aim of the Fund is not only to manage water but more broadly "to improve the environmental and socio-economic situation in the Aral Sea Basin". The Aral Sea and the two major rivers (Amou Daria and Syr Daria) have attracted most of the attention, but there are hundreds of smaller transboundary river basins shared by riparian countries. In 2003, OSCE, UNECE and UNESCAP initiated the project for the Chu and Talas Rivers and this led to the creation in 2006 of an international commission (Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan).

The framework of highland-lowland could extend beyond the topic of water and, notably, with the emerging concept of ecosystem services (Rudaz 2012), as evidenced, for example, by the mountains of Central Asia having been identified as a hotspot of biodiversity by the non-governmental organization Conservation International. In the Millennium Ecosystem Assessment, specific attention is devoted to mountains and the highland-lowland framework is considered as promising: "Maximizing highland-lowland complementarities is crucial for both

¹ See <http://www.ec-ifas.org/>.

upstream and downstream communities. Healthy mountain communities require linkages to lowland markets, and lowland populations need mountain people to serve as stewards for upland resources and watersheds” (Körner and Ohsawa 2006).

4. Positioning on the International Agenda

The countries of Central Asia became independent in 1991, each of them through their own national process. Even if Russia had and still continues to have a tremendous influence on the region, their world broadened tremendously. This is the time when they entered the international political arena as independent countries, looking for new partners for development. The year following their independence saw the organization of the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED), held in 1992 in Rio de Janeiro and commonly known as the Earth Summit. The conference reflected the momentum in international cooperation towards sustainability and the international enthusiasm towards the event is reminiscent of Francis Fukuyama’s “The End of History”. With this background, we can observe that sustainability has ranked high and has been quickly integrated into the political agendas of Central Asia, whether followed by concrete actions or not.

The UNCED 1992 embodied the momentum of mountain advocates and enabled them to promote a global agenda for sustainable mountain development (Rudaz 2011). This led to the inscription in Agenda 21, the action plan arising from the conference, of a chapter devoted to mountains – Chapter 13, “Managing Fragile Ecosystems: Sustainable Mountain Development”. Switzerland was instrumental in pushing this global

mountain agenda and had to rely on its international “allies”, often landlocked mountainous countries to which it provided international aid. Switzerland had many points of contact with Central Asia. Indeed, a month before UNCED, Switzerland joined the International Monetary Fund and took the lead among a group comprising the Central Asian states among others and came to be known as Helvetistan – a name coined from the official name of Switzerland “Confoederatio Helvetica” and “stan”, meaning “country” and which the names of the countries of Central Asia have in common. Against this background, Kyrgyzstan rapidly emerged as a promoter of the cause of mountains in the international political arena. It is at the request of Kyrgyzstan that the UN proclaimed 2002 “International Year of Mountains”. Kyrgyzstan was eager in that role and organized the final and major event of the year: the Bishkek Global Mountain Summit.

“Mountains” could be a label mobilized to gain visibility in the international political arena. In the regional report for Central Asia evaluating the progress towards sustainable mountain development and presented at the Rio+20 Conference (2012), two major recommendations were formulated. It proposed “the creation of a mountain countries group under the auspices of the United Nations” and “the exchange of external debt for an equivalent investment in sustainable development” (Hughes 2012: 7).

This involvement in the global mountain agenda has impacts at national and regional levels, putting mountains high on political agendas, which is usually not the case. Indeed, few countries have policies focusing on mountains (Castelain et al. 2006). Following the declaration of the International Year of Mountains, Kyrgyzstan

enacted a law on mountain territories (2002), further supported by a government decree (2007). Tajikistan is in the process of designing its own national mountain law. These laws focus on poverty reduction and provide financial support for infrastructure in order to improve the standard of living in mountain areas. At the regional level, the Regional Sustainable Development Strategy for Central Asia stated that the “prosperity of the Central Asian region depends in many aspects on the health condition of the Pamir and Tien Shan mountainous ecosystems”. The Regional Environmental Action Plan approved in 2001 by all Central Asian states also treats mountain ecosystems as a regional environmental priority. And lastly, “mountain ecosystem degradation” is one of the five priority areas of the Framework Convention on Environmental Protection for Sustainable Development in Central Asia.

5. Up-scaling Local Mountain Development Projects

Since independence, public expenditures decreased drastically. For instance, regarding health and education, spending is about a quarter of what it used to be during Soviet times (Hughes 2012: 10). Indeed, the USSR provided significant economic and social aid to the whole region, including mountain communities. The newly independent states could not maintain this level of support to these remote areas. With the introduction of the market economy, many jobs were lost, with the consequence of the out-migration of the male working force.

Poverty reduction is at the core of many international programs. International aid focuses on economic and social reforms and resource management. Numerous international aid agencies work at the local level, involved in small mountain development projects, as “mountain” is an appealing label for some donors.

Sustainable development is most of the time the overarching principle of these projects. Many of them imply a political dimension, as they aim to promote civil society, capacity building and, more broadly, empowerment of mountain communities.

A key example is the Central Asian Mountain Partnership (CAMP), initiated by the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation (SDC) and focusing on Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Kazakhstan. The sponsor, SDC, states the positive influence of the international recognition of the importance of mountains: “This project became especially relevant in the wake of the year 2002 which was declared the International Year of Mountains by the United Nations. At that time Central Asian states received a rare opportunity to attract the world's attention to the problems of rural people living in mountain areas”.² With sustainable mountain development as an agenda, CAMP is active in four main areas: resource use, product development and marketing, village development, and policy dialogue. The basic assumption is that better management of resources would lead to better living conditions for mountain communities. A central feature of the program is the support of local organizations promoting policy dialogue to address development and conservation issues.

The Alliance of Central Asian Mountain Communities (AGOCA) was created parallel to the Bishkek Mountain Summit (KG), with the aim to benefit from the impetus launched by this event concluding the International Year of Mountains (Nikonova et al. 2007). It is a network of

² See http://www.swiss-cooperation.admin.ch/centralasia/en/Home/Regional_Activities/Completed_projects/Mountain_Partnership (accessed 10 January 2013).

mountain communities from Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Kazakhstan who exchange information and experience, with the aim of implementing sustainable mountain development. There was an initial idea for the Alliance to also be a lobby for the cause of mountains in the region, but this has been dropped. CAMP played a decisive role in implementing AGOCA. By having innovative communities involved in sustainable mountain development, the idea is that exchanges of good practices could spread throughout the region. In this context, capacity building is an essential feature of the process.

The Pamir-Alai Land Management project (PALM) follows a similar logic. It works at the scale of the mountain range, which is transboundary between Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan. The project was initiated by the two countries, the Global Environment Facility, the United Nations Environment Program and the United Nations University. It promotes joint development and conservation objectives under the overarching aim of sustainable development. Having the states on board (TJ, KG), PALM definitely enhanced regional cooperation. However, a key feature is also the mobilization of the local level, as 114 micro-projects were also promoted. Another key feature of PALM is that upscaling and replication in other mountain regions of Central Asia of the lessons learned are a stated objective. Both CAMP and PALM believe in the capacity of local mountain communities to be stewards of resources for the benefit of people within the region and beyond.

6. Conclusion

For historical reasons, regional cooperation in Central Asia has been difficult. Mountains emerged as an issue that could enhance further regional cooperation. In this paper, I showed that

the regional cooperation referring to mountains in Central Asia is embedded in an international agenda for mountains framed under the overarching principle of sustainable development.

National mountain laws (KG, TJ) could secure the political recognition of mountains. However, it seems that the mountains of Central Asia will remain on the political agenda, when connected to a broader global mountain agenda. As stated in the report on Central Asia carried out for the Rio+20 Conference, “the Central Asian mountains provide an astonishing array of essential ecosystem goods and services not only to mountain inhabitants but also to people in the lowlands and around the globe” (Hughes 2012: 6). The label “mountains” provides a positioning both for mountain states and mountain communities of Central Asia through which to present themselves as stewards of resources whose importance extends far beyond the region.

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