

The continuation of the AlpCity project in the EU's planning for 2007-2013

AlpCity Internal Meeting – Piedmont Region
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The Lombardy Regional Administration's Directorate for Trade, Fairs and Markets keenly welcomed the proposal to continue the AlpCity project through the creation of an international workshop focussing on the collection, selection and improvement of best practices principally because it was in line with activities already underway. In 2002, the Lombardy Regional Administration instituted the Regional Monitoring Unit for Trade. Its activities include "monitoring of the trade network in all its forms and typologies, in order to make available to the regional administration, the categories and all of the interested parties all the information about the network features, its interactions with the territory and the demand evolution, innovation and application tools of regulations supporting trade activities". The decision to give this area a more international perspective, while focussing on the key and qualitative aspects of trade network planning, gives this initiative a major boost and opens up new horizons.

There is a specific item of expenditure that has been given financing so AlpCity's Extension Call could be launched.

The Observatory for Trade undertakes carefully focussed research and survey work and disseminates the results. In recent years, a substantial amount of energy has been put into determining consistency, but so far there is nothing structural when it comes to best practices. AlpCity offers a good opportunity to begin work aimed at urban areas.

The AlpCity project brought to light what is needed for trade to develop in mountain areas and, especially, in small villages that are not on regular tourist routes:

- The courage to try new things is limited.
- Entrepreneurial flair or willingness is lacking.
- Levels of training tend to be insufficient.
- A lack of reference models that could be applied.
- The lack of people that entrepreneurs can turn to for help in making decisions leads to and the fact that entrepreneurs feel they do not belong to a wider group or association (a positive example of this is the role played by the Chamber of Commerce in France in trying out new models for multi-service shops – creating chains of multi-service shops).

- Local administrations lack the ability to group together to promote events that can improve the attractiveness of these territories (Town Centre Management for the mountains – as suggested in the final report on the projects in Valcamonica and Valvestino).
- An inability to bring together territorial resources and initiatives.
- The lack of cooperation among the various levels of retail (large and medium-scale retailers and village shops).

As such, the regional administration does not only need to study and identify the best options to implement, promote and disseminate, but also to identify intermediary subjects that can help to expand the efforts being undertaken.

What we have done

With these objectives in mind, we began various activities that started as early as the final phase of AlpCity and involved the active participation of Dana and Antonella.

1) An initial workshop was held on 5 October at Unioncamere Lombardia in Milan to explore if and how the “intermediary subjects” in the relevant territories can support not only specific development initiatives, but also training and dissemination initiatives in the territory as well as becoming a reference point for small entrepreneurs.

The following were invited: Comunità Montane (mountain area authorities); nature park administrative authorities; chambers of commerce; and key members of large-scale retail. In the new regional plan, the latter group has been given the role of supporting and working with small-scale shops.

In particular, the councillor from the Comunità Montana Valcamonica explained what they had done to sustain trade in their territory. Their efforts included providing financial support for food shops located in municipalities over 400m above sea level and with populations of less than 1,000 people.

The Varese Chamber of Commerce presented a project aimed at creating multi-service shops in specific mountain areas that had been chosen on the basis of potential and necessity.

A key aspect highlighted was the need to commence this type experimentation only if it involves a micro-network of three or more shops.

2) A conference entitled “Regional and European Policies for Trade in Mountain Areas” was held in Milan on 20 November. At this event, proposals where the outcomes had been satisfactory were presented.

Notably, we were able to attract the attention of large-scale retailers. A representative from IPERAL, operating in the provinces of Sondrio and Brescia, emphasised the need for large-scale retailers to cooperate with smaller retailers to ensure the socio-economic development of the territory. IPERAL has already backed a project entitled “Grandi”. This involved the opening of a large-scale retail outlet being coupled with buying and refurbishing a village shop, in a municipality of 1,100 people, that was then handed over to be managed by an entrepreneur. The success of this project can be seen by the entrepreneur’s desire to buy two further shops in small municipalities, one in a lake area and the other in the mountains.

What we are doing

During this intermediary phase, we set up a simulation system that allows small entrepreneurs to check the economic feasibility of multi-service shops. The aim of this, in practical terms, is to create a “macro-model” using comparative analysis combined with geo-referencing a series of indicators about the local situation (accessibility and mobility), the demand for trade and related services and the presence of trade and complementary services already offered. This macro-model will evaluate the economic feasibility of a multi-service store. The margin for error will be reduced through the use of detailed information in the experimentation phase of the model by the entrepreneurs or intermediary subjects (chambers of commerce) that will support the entrepreneurs during the implementation of the project.

Besides the mountain theme, there is the more general theme of the commercial attractiveness of urban centres through urban regeneration and Town Centre Management. This is also a theme that the Regional Observatory can examine and that could be developed as part of a new European project.

At present, “Educational Tours” are being planned. These are aimed at local entrepreneurs and administrators, and the objective is to study, “in the field”, how town centre management has worked in other European countries (England, Spain,...).

Finally, we are working to involve associations. This is in line with the latest European directives that call for particular attention to be placed on building partnerships.

What we could do

Therefore, we feel that continuation of the project could involve a centralised “control room” located at the Piedmont Regional Administration. This would be linked to a network of “control rooms” in other regions (preferably being linked to the already existing Observatories – for trade as well as for the territory or statistical

aspects – in other regions) that would, in turn, be linked to a series of intermediary bodies that are involved in disseminating the models in the territory.