Policy Brief and Managerial Recommendations:

Territorial brands as a tool

for a collaborative, sustainable and circular Alpine region

Contents

Introduction

Territorial Brands (TBs) are territorial development initiatives that provide quality signals to clients, reassuring them of the local origin of products and services.
- Unlike Geographical Indications and the quality term 'mountain product', TBs are not recognized at the EU level. They are voluntary certification schemes regulated at the national or regional/local level or run by private operators.
- They can be based on a self-declarations or rely on a certification scheme with a third-party verification procedure.

Many Territorial Brands exist in the Alpine space. Previous EUSALP initiatives and projects highlighted their role as policy instruments for sustainable territorial development in the Alps.
- The INTERREG Alpine Space project project (2016-19) first mapped Alpine territorial brands, highlighting their contribution to safeguarding and valorizing the Alpine food heritage. The project recommended that TBs establish heritage-sensitive product specifications fostering facilitating collaboration across local value chains and synergies with the cultural, educational and tourism sector.
- In 2021, SUACI Montagn'Alpes and EURAC Research carried a EUSALP-supported mapping of Alpine Territorial Brands, identifying more than 20 initiatives in the French Alps, and more than 40 initiatives in the Alpine space. In 2022, ForTéa identified 28 timber labelling initiatives in the Alps.
- The biennial EUSALP Territorial Brands Conference (2019, 2021, 2023) has raised awareness among policy makers on the role that TBs can play to facilitate local economic development and transition to the circular economy.
- The ARPAF-II project «100% Local» developed solutions for the establishment of TBs with product specifications favoring radically local value chains, with products made with local raw materials and entirely processed locally. These 100% local value chains can constitute a tool for territorial differentiation and competitive success for peripheral Alpine regions.

Cross-border collaboration in the Alpine region is one of EUSALP's raisons d'etre. Previous EUSALP's initiatives on territorial branding have however emphasized 100% local value chains. These are feasible in the case of agri-food products, but more problematic for more complex value chains that require international division of labor.

- Some value chains are technologically complex. Often, specific regions or countries specialize in specific stage of the value chain thanks to shared infrastructural investments. The resulting territorial specialization permits to lower costs (economies of scale) but require sufficiently large markets (beyond the local region or country) to be profitable.
- For these value chains, the 100% Local approach would not be economic. Territorial specialization implies trade and collaboration at the supra-regional (and often, international) scale.
- Globalized value chains are increasingly scrutinized for their negative social and environmental impacts. International collaboration in the Alpine space might generate the economic benefit of territorial specialization with more limited environmental impacts and ensuring fair work conditions.

Despite the fact that no 'Made in the Alps' quality label or collective brand exist, the Alps – like other places – project a strong image that can be considered a de facto place brand capable of facilitating cross-border collaboration.

- At the EU level, a «mountain product» quality term exists, launched in 2012 to help mountain producers better promote their products. A collective trademark or voluntary scheme covering the Alpine space does not exist, nor is advocated by the 'Made in the Alps' project.
- Products from cross-border value chains may however use the common image of the Alps as a promotional asset.

The ARPAF-III project 'Made in the Alps' extensively investigated the Alpine image and the meanings consumers attribute to products from Alpine value chains.

- As a first step, involved researchers carried out a literature review on place brands; desk research on how the image of the Alps is used to promote local products by brands of different kinds; a more systematic content analysis of references to the Alps in trademarks and figurative logos, with data from the online database TMViews.
- This was followed by in-depth interviews with a sample of N=23 informants from different regions of the Alps, in collaboration with the EUSALP Youth Council, and a series of quantitative studies (2 surveys and 7 experiments, involving more than 1,000 consumers of different nationalities).

We tested and discussed with local stakeholders the insight emerging from research activities through pilot actions in Switzerland and Slovenia involving the wood and textile value chains.

- In Valposchiavo (CH, Pilot action 1), we involved the local territorial brand managing organization, local stakeholders, actors in the wood-forestry value chains and other artisans. The local territorial brand (100% Valposchiavo) has existed for more than 10 years, and local stakeholders felt the need to extend the brand to wood-forestry. We involved an Italian design firm from Lombardy, with the goal of providing aesthetic and design capabilities which were missing locally. Thanks to the pilot activities, an action plan was co-developed and funding from the Swiss Federation (Action Plan Wood) was obtained.
- In Slovenia (Pilot Action 2), we involved actors from two communities with complementary resources/competences, but without a history of collaboration. In Škofja Loka, we involved the Craft Center DUO, which supports local artisans. In the remote area of Solčava (the Slovenian region with the highest wool production), we involved an association of local woman called Bicka. The pilot action was designed as first steps in establishing collaboration, from which both craftswomen and artisans from both regions could benefit from sharing resources & skills, and potentially in the future develop heritage & resource-sensitive circular products from a cross-regional value chain.

Our research findings were also discussed in the context of the 3rd EUSALP International Conference on Territorial Brands in the Alpine Region, which also explored the role that territorial brands can have in accelerating the transition to the circular economy.

- The Conference explored, with the help of territorial brands, experts, and other stakeholders, how territorial brands can be used as a tool for a collaborative and sustainable Alpine Region, in the presence of members of various EUSALP Action Groups and Youth Council.
- The newly released EUSALP Action Groups' Work Plan, emphasing circularity as a cross-cutting priority, provided an opportunity to discuss insights from the Made in the Alps project and further explore the contribution of territorial brands to the transition to the circular economy in the Alps.

The goal of this report is to clarify what Territorial Brands are, summarize key insight emerging from the Made in the Alps project, and propose policy and managerial recommendations so that Territorial Brands can contribute to a more collaborative, sustainable and circular Alpine Region.

- Part 1 introduces the notion of Territorial Brands and explains why they are relevant for the EU macro-regional strategy.
- Part 2 reports key findings from the ARPAF-III Made in the Alps project, and develops managerial recommendations for Territorial Brands, the organizations managing them, and their stakeholders.
- Part 3 discusses the role of Territorial Brands as policy tools in the context of the EU Strategy for the Alps, with a particular focus on the EUSALP Action Group's cross cutting priority #4 on the circular economy.
- This report was prepared by prof. Diego Rinallo (emlyon business school) and Dr Erik Logar (ZRC SAZU), with input from prof Marta Pizzetti (emlyon business school), Mr Cassiano Luminati (Polo Poschiavo), and Dr Katarina Šrimpf Vendramin (ZRC SAZU).

1. Territorial Brands:

What they are and why they matter

What are Territorial Brands?

Brands are names, symbols, logos or other marks that identifies offers from specific suppliers allowing consumers to distinguish them from competitors' offers.

When newly created, brands are 'empty vessels' that mean nothing to consumers. They acquire meaning as they are promoted and as related offers (products, services, experiences) are consumed and experienced.

- Legally creating a trademark is not enough for a brand to exist in consumers' minds and hearts. For them to be strong, they need to be known by consumers (brand awareness), associated to specific meanings (brand image), stimulate purchases, and increase the prices consumers are willing to pay compared to unbranded products.

Territorial Brands have no univocal definition. The term is often used to refer to very different typologies of brands that are somehow linked to a place, including individual brands (example: Yves Saint-Laurent Paris). In this report, we focus on territorial brands of collective nature, which are much more complex to manage than individual brands.

There are different typologies of collective brands linked to a territory, which are often referred to with different terms (place brands, local brands, regional brands, etc.).

- City brands are established at the city or metropolitan area level. Their main goal is to attract new firms, authorities or inhabitants/talents (creative workers, students, etc.) in their territory.
- Destination brands are run by tourism management organizations with the goal of attracting tourists and improve the image of the area as a tourist destination.
- Geographical Indications are managed by trade associations typically covering the entire value chain of a single product (example, Champagne, Parmigiano Reggiano, Prosciutto di Parma). Existing EU regulation of geographical indications, in the past covering only foodstuffs and agricultural products, will soon be extended to crafts and industrial products.
- Other collective place brands are run by organizations that promote an entire product category. Examples include Haute Couture (Paris), Bois des Alpes (France), Swiss Wine or Swiss Cheese.

In this report, based on established EUSALP conventions, the term Territorial Brands is used to refer to collective brands guaranteeing the local origin of the products they promote. The Territorial Brand acts as an umbrella brand for products offered by different producers, here referred to as members of the Territorial Brand.

- Territorial brands focus on products from different value chains, including non-food products and services (hotels, restaurants, tourist guides, etc.). Their product specification determine the criteria to be respected to be allowed to use the territorial brands (example, 100% local production, or products coherent with the area's cultural heritage, etc.). They can be linked to certification schemes with third-party controls.
- Most territorial brands are established by regional or local governments or trade associations. Some have a private nature. Natural parks also often create territorial brands.

Territorial brands can operate at different territorial scales, from the national to the local level.

- Some countries establish national-level territorial brands. This is for example the case of Switzerland (regulation on Swissness) and France (regulation on the use of the term 'Fabriqué en France).
- Regional authorities also often establish their territorial brands. This is the example for example of the *Marque Valais* in the Swiss Canton of Valais/Wallis, or the Qualität Tirol label in the Austrian Land of Tyrol.
- Territorial brands can also be established at the local level. This is for example the case of the 100% Valposchiavo territorial brand, established in the Valposchiavo region in the Swiss Canton of Graubunden.

Territorial brands can cover geographical areas overlapping with that of other territorial brands. The same area can be covered by brands of different scale, from local to national.

- A case in point are producers from the Valposchiavo (CH), who can have their products certified by different territorial brands: '100% Valposchiavo' (local brand), Alpina Vera (a territorial brand covering products from various Swiss Cantons, including Graubunden), and/or "Made in Switzerland".
- Adhering to a territorial brand, from the perspective of a member, is subject to a cost/benefit analysis. These different levels can be more or less useful, depending also on target markets (local, regional or national/export markets).
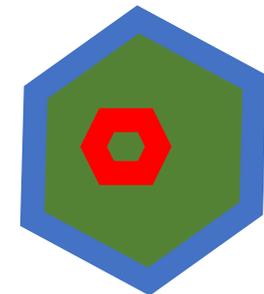
*Smaller territorial brand within a larger geographical area*

Territorial brands are often delimitated by administrative borders (Cantons, Lander, Regions, Departments, Provinces, Municipalities, etc.). Some cross-regional territorial brands exist, but establishing cross-border territorial brands is difficult.

- The Swiss territorial brands Alpina Vera, cover products handcrafted and produced with at least 80% local ingredients in the Swiss Cantons of Uri, Glarus, Ticino, and Graubunen, provided that the majority of the added value is locally produced. The scale of this territorial brand is supra-Cantonal.
- Natural parks (and the territorial brands they establish) also sometimes cover inter-regional areas. A case in point is the Park Naturel Régional du Massif des Bauges (FR), which covers 67 municipalities in the Departments of Savoie and Haute Savoie.
- Cross-border territorial brands are much more difficult to establish, given differences in national regulations. Two transboundary natural parks, established under the Europark Federation, exist in the Alpine space: the Julian Alps Transboundary Eco-region (IT/SL) and the Binntal/Veglia Devero Transboundary Nature Park (IT/CH), which could potentially establish cross-border territorial brands.

Past EUSALP initiatives have emphasized 100% local territorial brands, which are relatively easy to establish for agri-food products, but problematic for more complex value chains.

- In some cases, a 100% local approach (from raw materials to all stages of the value chains) would not allow to take advantage of economies of scales and specialisation.
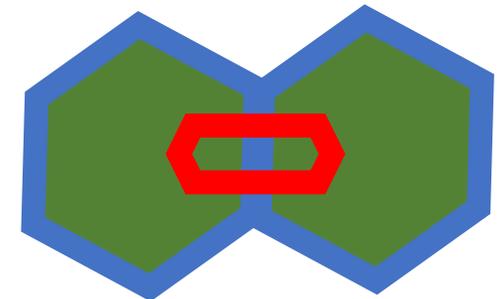
Cross-border territorial brand

Also national-level place branding efforts tend to support national – rather than cross-border – value chains.

- With the Covid-19 crisis, many national governments have funded policies to relocalize manufacturing. Like 100% local or regional value chains, policies that emphasize domestic production might hinder cross-border collaboration.
- From an environmental perspective, cross-border value chains involving nearby regions might reduce CO2 emissions and might have better environmental performances than 100% national value chains requiring material flows from one side to the other of large countries.

The ARPAF-III Made in the Alps project investigated the shared image of the Alps as a cultural resource (or intangible asset) that could facilitate cross-border collaboration. In Part II of the present report we summarize key findings from our research activities.

2. The image of the Alps:
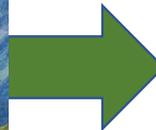# A valuable cultural resource

Territorial brands, as well as individual brands and products, do use the image of the Alps.
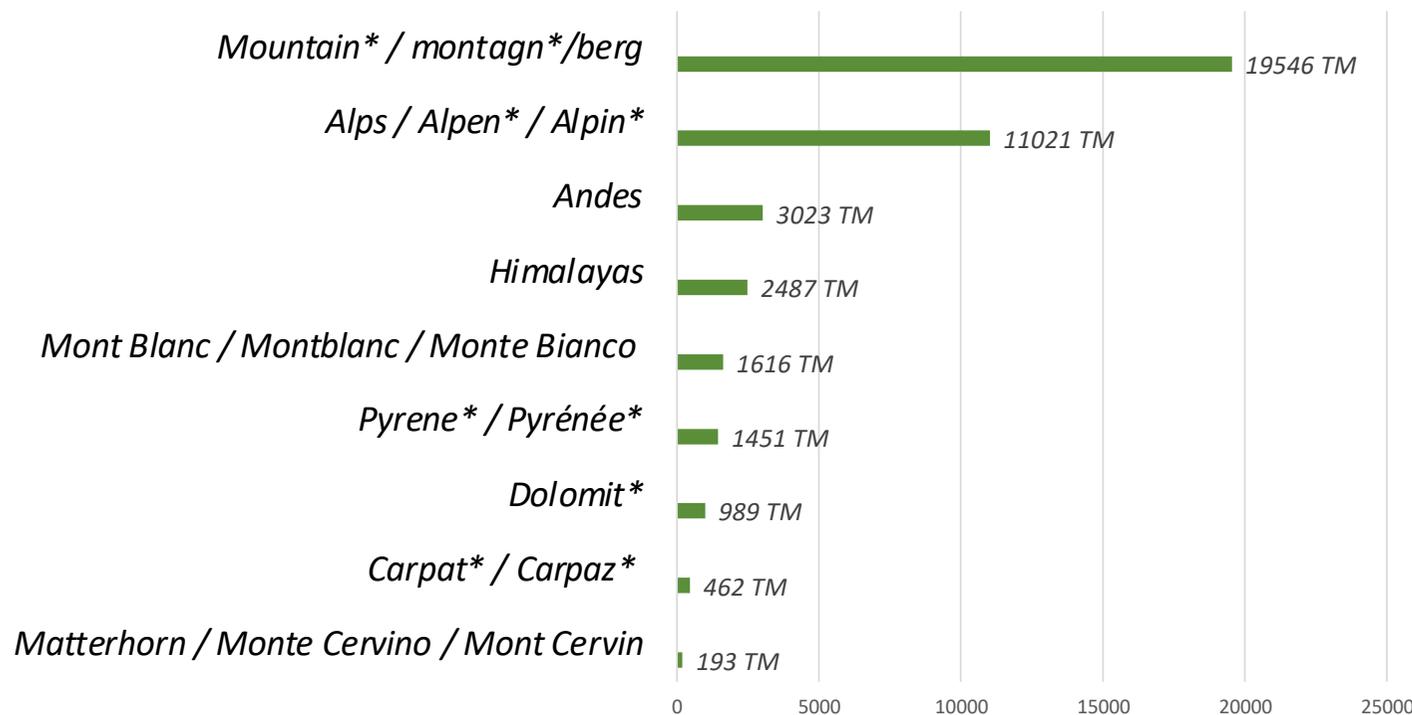
The ARPAF-III Project Made in the Alps carried out a multi-method analysis to investigate the image of the Alps and the process through which it is transferred to Alpine products.

EUSALP
EU STRATEGY FOR
THE ALPINE REGION

Co-funded by
the European Union

MADE IN THE ALPS
ARPAF III

ZRC SAZU

em
lyon
business
school
lifestyle
research
center

Polo
Poschiavo

We found that many trademarks contain Alpine references.

Category	TM count
Mountain* / montagn*/berg	19546 TM
Alps / Alpen* / Alpin*	11021 TM
Andes	3023 TM
Himalayas	2487 TM
Mont Blanc / Montblanc / Monte Bianco	1616 TM
Pyrene* / Pyrénée*	1451 TM
Dolomit*	989 TM
Carpat* / Carpaz*	462 TM
Matterhorn / Monte Cervino / Mont Cervin	193 TM

Reference to the Alps in trademarks dominates other mountain ranges. It is second only to generic references to mountains.

Also brands from non-Alpine countries, such as the UK, China, and USA, register trademarks with Alpine references.

The fact that this many companies refers to the Alps in their trademarks implies that the image of the Alps is attractive.

The sector that use Alpine references the most in their trademarks are clothing (sportwear, traditional costumes), food and beverage, and sport/tourism services.

Source: Emlyon business school analyses on TMVIEW data (2023)

In some cases, the link between products labelled as Alpine and their material conditions of production is so tenuous that they can be configured as cases of cultural appropriation or even 'Alpinewashing'.

A case in point is that of Alpen, a muesli brand part of the Weetabix Food Company (UK). The product is not produced in the Alps or from ingredients made in the Alps. Benefits from its sales do not benefit companies located in Alpine regions.

- Here is the story of the brand, as told on the company website itself (https://www.alpenfood.co.za/alpen-muesli/recipes/7).

- «In 1971 Weetabix's marketing director was visiting Switzerland when he was served his first taste of Swiss style muesli during breakfast. He returned to create Alpen, based on Bircher-Benner's recipe and this has remained unchanged to this day».

**An Alpine brand
which is not 'Made in the Alps'**

The image of the Alps is positive and attractive, but can be a mixed blessing.

Qualitative interviews, carried out in collaboration with the EUSALP Youth Council, highlighted that the image of the Alps is linked to nature and is easily transferred to food and craft products. Products from other value chains, particularly if technology-oriented or aesthetically innovative, are less associated to the Alps.

Image of the Alps

Positive, attractive, linked to nature

Romantic = exotic, primitive, untouched by modernity

The complexity of the Alps is simplified by those who «consume» the Alps through tourist experiences

Image of products «Made in the Alps»

The transfer of meaning occurs mostly in the case of
- Artisanal/hand-made products
- Food

Much less in the case of textiles
- Sheep are not associated to wool
- Clothes not everyday use

The Romantic image is a mixed blessing (does not reward innovation)

Products made in the Alps elicit positive consumer responses

Experimental research shows that when products are made in the Alps from local raw materials, consumer perceptions are generally good, particularly – but not only – for handmade products.

There's a potential for hybrid products from Alpine raw materials but processed elsewhere. The origin counts in consumers' eye. Cross-border collaboration shouldn't be problematic in consumers' eyes, particularly if it is environmentally motivated.

Products 'Made in the Alps' with non-local raw materials risk however being perceived less authentic (Alpwashing). We assume this might be less of a problem when raw materials are not locally available (think of Swiss chocolate with imported cocoa).

Source: Emlyon business school
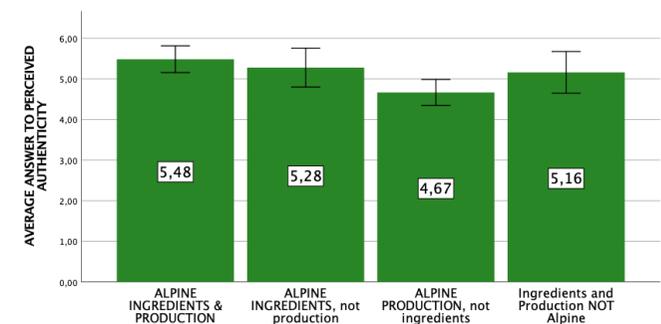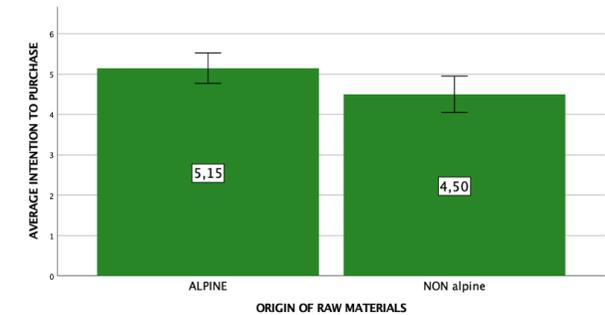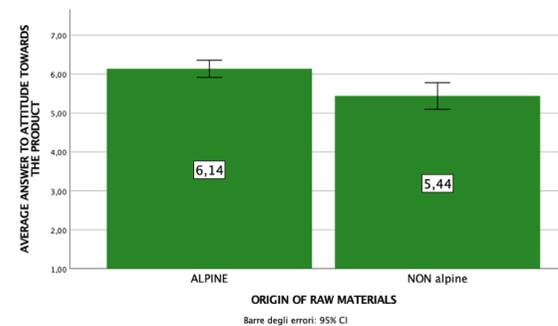
3. Managerial Recommendations
for Territorial Brands and their Stakeholders

1. The Alps have a rather positive and attractive image, which connotes some products 'Made in the Alps' more than others.

Historically, this positive image of the Alps is linked to the Romantic discovery of the Alps as a place of pristine nature, untouched by modernity, where one can be in touch with oneself and escape from the crowed, noisy and polluted city life. Such attractive image, which has been shaped by Alpinism and by Alpine elite and mass tourism. These costitutive elements still linger in consumers' perceptions. Despite the fact that no label certifying product origin exists, the image of the Alps can be considered a place brand, or an intangible cultural resource available to all Alpine producers.

Alpine products do benefit from the Alps' romantic image with its natural and traditional connotations. They are considered to be of good quality, artisanal, produced in small volumes, heritage-based, environmentally friendly, and distributed through short circuits. Overall, they are perceived as the result of a different productive philosophy compared to industrial mass-produced goods. The Alpine image does not however lend justice to the complexity of Alpine products, but with all its pros and cons it can be used to promote products from Alpine value chains.

Specifically, products from agri-food value chains are 'top of mind' in consumers perceptions. Visible elements of the Alps' cultural landscapes, through a chain of cognitive associations, are associated to a better taste (Alpine flowers → better honey; cows grazing grass on pastures → better milk and cheese).

Territorial Brands' uses of the image of the Alps

Other products from traditional value chains are less prominent in consumers' perceptions. For example, sheep (less visible than cows) are not automatically associated to wool, and Alpine style in clothing is associated to old-fashioned/retro costumes, such as dirndl or lederhosen (and much less to skiwear and outdoor technical clothing). Wood is more present than textile value chains due to the omnipresence of forests, yet tree cutting evokes negative associations to environmentally sensitive consumers and products mentioned are limited to mountain furniture and interior designs, and chalets. The strong link to tradition makes it difficult to associate the Alps to technologically innovative products or non-traditional aesthetics.

2. Consumers tend to think of Alpine products in binary terms (local/non-local). They have limited awareness of the complexity of Alpine value chains, mixing local and non-local raw materials and processing.

Products 'made in the Alps' are perceived as being 100% local. Thanks to experimental research designs, we investigated perceptions on different combinations of ingredient origin and place of production. Overall, we found that the origin of raw materials is an important driver of consumer response. This also extends to products based on local ingredients but processed elsewhere.

Products 'made in the Alps' from ingredients from elsewhere can instead trigger negative perceptions, particularly when these ingredients can be locally available. These products are perceived as less authentic.

Territorial Brands' uses of the image of the Alps

3. The 100% Local model can co-exist with other approaches to place branding in the Alpine space.

The **100% Local** approach has been the object of previous EUSALP initiatives. Many territorial brands adopt it, emphasizing that all ingredients/raw material and all stages of the production process are local. This approach can benefit regions as it can lead to local collaboration, joint innovation, and re-introduction or revitalization of traditional crops. At the same time, however, this approach can hinder inter-regional or cross-border collaboration as external inputs or skills are substituted with local ones. The 100% Local approach is easy to communicate to consumers, but might be difficult to implement when not all local resources and competence are available in sufficient quantities or adequate quality.

The product specifications of many territorial brands also adopt a **Made In** approach to place branding for products that are locally processed with non-local input. Usually, a minimum % of the added value or the ingredients must be certified as local. The distinction between the 100% Local and the Made In model reminds the difference between Protected Denominations of Origin (PDO) and Protected Geographical Indications (PGI), as the latter require local processing in important phases of the production process but allow for ingredients of non-local origin. A Made in approach can be adopted to include in territorial branding initiatives local producers whose products require non-local inputs or to give them the time to adapt their procurement practices. It can also benefit successful products whose demand exceeds locally available resources. Consumers might however be skeptical of these products, particularly if local raw material are available.

Territorial Brands' uses of the image of the Alps

Possible approaches to place branding in the Alpine space

«100% Local» approach	• Place branding based on 100% local value chains: products are entirely made locally from local ingredients. Possible when all raw materials and processing competences are or could be locally available. • Approach emphasized in previous EUSALP initiatives. It does not require inter-region or cross-border collaboration.
«Made in» approach	• Place branding highlighting the place of production rather than the origin of raw materials/ingredients, that can be non-local. Suitable when local inputs are not available in sufficient quantity or quality. • The difference between the 100% Local and the Made In approach reminds the distincion between the PDO and PGI in geographical indications. Territorial brands might require minimum % of local value added or ingredients.
«Origin of raw material» approach	• Place branding based on the local origin of raw material, which are partially processed elsewhere. Possible when local raw materials are available, but complementary resources and skills are not. • Atypical approach for territorial brands, which favor the «100% Local» or the «Made in» approach. It can permit to valorize local resources benefitting from the territorial specialization of other areas, thus resulting in better quality or reduced production costs.

Consumers' Perceptions of 'Made in the Alps'

The **origin of raw materials** approach is atypical for territorial brands in the Alpine areas. It permit to valorize local resources when complementary input and skills are not locally available. An example in point is textile fibers such as flax or wool, which are locally produced in many Alpine regions, but whose value chains are complex and require territorial specialization at the international level. This approach to place branding can result in territorial cooperation, also across national borders. Consumers might respond favorably to products and brands valorizing local resources.

We thus recommend that territorial brands in the Alpine region consider all these approaches in their product specifications, adapting that to specific local conditions and value chain considerations.

4. To some extent, the Alps connote products better than a generic 'mountain' origin.

Unsurprisingly, the Alps' image overlaps with the general perception of mountains. Our results may thus be somewhat applicable to products from other mountain ranges, like the Pyrenees or the Carpathians. While no official Alpine label exists, the EU introduced an optional quality mention for 'mountain products' in 2012. However, some EU states have yet to implement this regulation at the national level. Our findings suggest that this mention could influence consumer responses, including willingness to pay. For producers in Alpine regions, emphasizing the Alps' image instead of a broader mountain origin may have a more significant impact on consumer responses in certain cases. Further research is necessary for conclusive findings on this matter.

Territorial Brands' uses of the image of the Alps

5. Territorial brands in the Alpine region should consider engaging in alliances with other territorial brands, which can benefit from the common «Made in the Alps» image.

The relationship between neighboring territorial brands can be considered one of coopetition, mixing together elements of competition and cooperation. Networks of places cooperating under an umbrella place brand or alliances among territorial brands (Pasquinelli, 2011, 2013, 2023) are possible solutions for inter-regional cross-border place promotion and for the establishment of cross-border value chains.

Cases of brand alliances exist in the context of tourist destinations, events, natural parks. They are not yet diffused in the case of territorial brands certifying the local origin of products. In these contexts, according to prof. Pasquinelli, it is important to:
- Select the right partners. Complementarity of resources and competences across borders is key.
- Define the scope of the collaboration: just one product, various products from one value chain, different value chains?
-Design the right communication approach, based on appropriate storytelling. The alliance can in some cases not be communicated to consumers (for example, local raw material can be processed elsewhere, like in the case of Swiss linen or Mérinos d'Arles products). In others, the alliance can be at the center of communication (the best of two words: Swiss wood with Italian design).

4. Policy recommendations
for the EU Strategy for the Alps:
Territorial Brands as a tool for a collaborative, sustainable and circular Alpine region

Boosting the circular economy is one of the cross-cutting priorities of EUSALP's Action Groups

ABSTRACT

The circular economy is a new economic model that disrupts linear business processes by extending the life cycle of products, promoting more efficient use of our limited resources, and encouraging responsible consumption. It involves sharing, leasing, reusing, repairing, refurbishing, recycling, and upcycling existing materials and products as long as possible, as well as valorising and utilising production side streams. Circular economy addresses climate change-related issues, population ageing in the Alpine area, mobility, labour (future skills), education, and many other EUSALP-relevant policies. Furthermore, the circular economy offers specific opportunities for mountain regions' sustainable enhancement and promotion. Several EUSALP action groups will address this horizontal economic principle, as it represents a unique opportunity to create joint innovative actions, extend value chains, set up new tools, and develop cross-border financial instruments and projects that foster the sustainable use of limited Alpine resources (water, wood, metals, food) as well as the use of clean and green energy.

Source: Work Plans 23-24 EUSALP Action Groups: Cross Cutting Priorities

This definition adopts a meso-level system perspective (focus on the Alpine region).

Main emphasis is on economic prosperity (new economic model, horizontal economic principle) but the definition also touches upon environmental sustainability (climate change) and some social inclusion elements (labour, education, population ageing).

While not explicitly mentioned, links with territorial branding emerge from the adopted definition of circularity:
"mountain regions' promotion"
"joint innovative actions"
". . . encouraging responsible consumption"
"sustainable use of limited Alpine resources"
These and other core principles could be inscribed in territorial brands' product specifications.

The Circular Economy has many competing definitions, which are little understood outside of expert contexts. The number of definitions seems to be growing.

Review

Conceptualizing the circular economy: An analysis of 114 definitions

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ARTICLE INFO

ABSTRACT

The circular economy concept has gained momentum both among scholars and practitioners. However, critics claim that it means many different things to different people. This paper provides further evidence for these critics. The aim of this paper is to create transparency regarding the current understandings of the circular economy concept. For this purpose, we have gathered 114 circular economy definitions which were coded on 17 dimensions. Our findings indicate that the circular economy is most frequently depicted as a combination of reduce, reuse and recycle activities, whereas it is oftentimes not highlighted that CE necessitates a systemic shift. We further find that the definitions show few explicit linkages of the circular economy concept to sustainable development. The main aim of the circular economy is considered to be economic prosperity, followed by environmental quality; its impact on social equity and future generations is barely mentioned. Furthermore, neither business models nor consumers are frequently outlined as enablers of the circular economy. We critically discuss the various circular economy conceptualizations throughout this paper. Overall, we hope to contribute via this study towards the coherence of the circular economy concept; we presume that significantly varying circular economy definitions may eventually result in the collapse of the concept.

Review

Conceptualizing the Circular Economy (Revisited): An Analysis of 221 Definitions

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ARTICLE INFO

ABSTRACT

In the past decade, use of the circular economy (CE) concept by scholars and practitioners has grown steadily. In a 2017 article, Kirchherr et al. found that the CE concept is interpreted and implemented in a variety of ways. While multiple interpretations of CE can enrich scholarly perspectives, differentiation and fragmentation can also impede consolidation of the concept. Some scholarship has discussed these trends in context-specific cases, but no large-scale, systematic study has analysed whether such consolidation has taken place across the field. This article fills this gap by analysing 221 recent CE definitions, making several notable findings. First, the concept has seen both consolidation and differentiation in the past five years. Second, definitional trends are emerging that potentially have more meaning for scholarship than for practice. Third, scholars increasingly recommend a fundamental systemic shift to enable CE, particularly within supply chains. Fourth, sustainable development is frequently considered the principal aim of CE, but questions linger about whether CE can mutually support environmental sustainability and economic development. Finally, recent studies argue that CE transition relies on a broad alliance of stakeholders, including producers, consumers, policymakers, and scholars. This study contributes an updated systematic analysis of CE definitions and conceptualizations that serves as an empirical snapshot of current scholarly thinking. It thereby provides a basis for further research on whether conceptual consolidation is needed and how it can be facilitated for practical purposes.

Definitions of the Circular Economy emphasize different aspects.

	Strategies	
Smarter product use and manufacture	R0 Refuse	Make product redundant by abandoning its function or by offering the same function with a radically different product
	R1 Rethink	Make product use more intensive (e.g. by sharing product)
	R2 Reduce	Increase efficiency in product manufacture or use by consuming fewer natural resources and materials
Extend lifespan of product and its parts	R3 Reuse	Reuse by another consumer of discarded product which is still in good condition and fulfils its original function
	R4 Repair	Repair and maintenance of defective product so it can be used with its original function
	R5 Refurbish	Restore an old product and bring it up to date
	R6 Remanufacture	Use parts of discarded product in a new product with the same function
	R7 Repurpose	Use discarded product or its parts in a new product with a different function
Useful application of materials	R8 Recycle	Process materials to obtain the same (high grade) or lower (low grade) quality
	R9 Recover	Incineration of material with energy recovery

Circular economy ← Increasing circularity ← **Linear economy**

Different aims: Economic prosperity, environmental quality, social equity, future generations

Core principles built around a growing numbers of Rs
- 3Rs (reduce, reuse, recycle)
- 4Rs (3Rs + Recover)
- 9Rs (see figure)

Some definitions emphasize that the CE require a fundamental shift instead that marginal adaptations of the existing system.

Definitions can refer to different scales: Macro (the structure of the entire economy); Meso (regions, technological parks), Micro (individual firms, consumers).

Territorial brands can operate at the meso level, supporting the micro-level activities of individual firms and consumers, and contributing to macro-level transitions.

Source: Kirchherr et al. (2017)

An Alpine approach to circularity?

Alpine communities have long developed practices and values that can be interpreted as circular. The Interreg Alpine Space AlpFoodway (2016-19) mapped some of these values and practices, linked to the specific mix of Alpine culture and nature:

- Production and consumption of proximity, resulting in short value chains
- Care of the territory, resulting in sustainable use of natural resources
- Sobriety and parsimony, leading to limited waste, creative uses of side-products, re-use and design for extended product life
- Mutual aid and community welfare, leading to the sharing of resources (pastures, ovens, mills, etc.)

Territorial brands, regional governments and other actors can take inspiration from this living heritage to accelerate transition to a circular future.

Territorial brands developed by Natural Parks already emphasize some of the Rs of circularity…

Item A : développer une démarche écoresponsable

Critères	Obligatoire ou facultatif	Indicateurs	Modalités de contrôle
Critère obligatoire			
Critère n°7 : Gestion des déchets liés à l'activité de transformation Les déchets, liés à l'activité de transformation, sont intégrés à un circuit de recyclage ou valorisés.	O	Compostage des déchets organiques (l'utilisateur composte lui-même les déchets organiques ou les oriente vers une filière de compostage) OU autre mode de valorisation des déchets organiques OU Dépôt des déchets de l'activité de transformation (emballages vides, plastiques, cartons,…) dans un centre de collecte ou une déchetterie.	Déclaration sur l'honneur Visite sur place Bon de dépôt OU attestation sur l'honneur pour un dépôt en déchetterie
Critères facultatifs			
Critère n°7 bis : Gestion des déchets liés à l'activité de transformation fromagère Le lactosérum est intégré à un circuit de valorisation ou de traitement.	F	Gestion de tout ou partie du lactosérum à travers le recyclage (compose une partie de la ration du bétail, lombri-compostage, méthanisation…) la valorisation par la transformation (brousse, sérac, …) ou des solutions alternatives au rejet avec les eaux usées sont mises en place.	Déclaration sur l'honneur Visite sur place
Critère n°8 : Conditionnement des produits transformés dans des matériaux recyclables Dans le cadre de son activité de transformation, l'utilisateur limite le recours aux emballages ou utilise des contenants recyclables.	F	Mise en place d'un politique de réduction des emballages OU Contenants ou emballages des produits transformés en matériaux recyclables : verre, carton, métal…	Déclaration sur l'honneur Visite sur place

https://www.espritparcnational.com/sites/default/files/reglements/20191122rucproduitstransformes.pdf

Territorial brands developed by Natural Parks already emphasize some of the Rs of circularity…

Piano di miglioramento ambientale triennale (RG 1)					
Si applica a:	Ambito	Aspetto Ambientale	Obiettivo di Miglioramento	Azione	Da conseguire entro… (anno 1 2 e 3)
Tutti	Packaging e confezionamento dei prodotti	Rifiuti Urbani	Riduzione della produzione dei Rifiuti Urbani	Evitare l'utilizzo di imballaggi inutili e voluminosi. Promuovere l'utilizzo di borse in cotone, carta riciclata e Mater-Bi, opportunamente personalizzate, anziché sacchetti in plastica.	
Tutti	Packaging e confezionamento dei prodotti	Consumo materie prime	Incrementare il recupero dei materiali	Utilizzare, ove possibile, imballaggi di confezionamento prodotti con quantità elevate di materiale proveniente da recupero.	
Tutti	Pulizia locali	Rifiuti Urbani	Riduzione della produzione dei Rifiuti Urbani	Utilizzare detergenti sfusi con flaconi ricaricabili per la pulizia dei locali. I detergenti devono essere certificati con un marchio ecologico (es. Ecolabel).	
Tutti	Degustazioni	Rifiuti Urbani	Riduzione della produzione dei Rifiuti Urbani	Utilizzare piatti, bicchieri, tazze di vetro o ceramica. Alternativamente utilizzare stoviglie di materiale espressamente dichiarato come compostabile dal produttore secondo la norma europea EN 13432 "Requisiti per imballaggi recuperabili mediante compostaggio e biodegradazione - Schema di prova e criteri di valutazione per l'accettazione finale degli imballaggi". (es-Mater-Bi).	
Tutti	Illuminazione dei locali (ad esclusione dei laboratori di produzione)	Risparmio energetico	Riduzione dei consumi di energia elettrica	Una percentuale significativa (almeno il 50%) delle lampadine installate devono essere lampade fluorescenti compatte (LFC) dette anche a "basso consumo".	
Tutti	Uso acqua igienico-sanitaria	Consumi idrici	Riduzione dei consumi idrici	Installare i rompi-getto aerati per i rubinetti (RA).	

Marchio di Qualità del Parco del Gran Paradiso
http://www.pngp.it/sites/default/files/documenti/Progetti/marchio/disciplinari/agroalimentare_-_caseario.pdf

… but they could do more, changing their product specifications and using their roles as coordinators of members firms to accelerate transition to the circular economy.
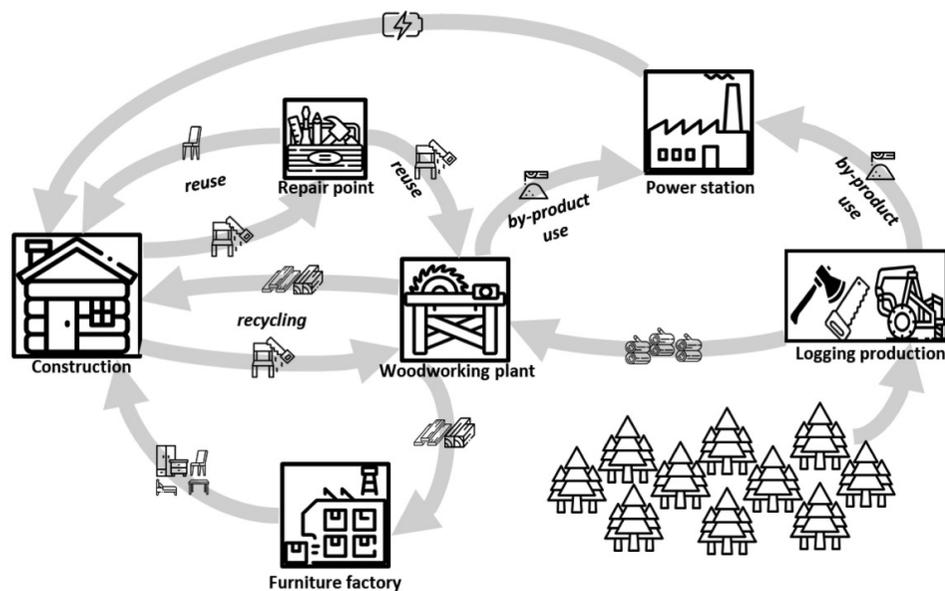
Territorial brands are collective territorial development initiatives that already serve as platforms for collaboration among local actors and joint innovation.

Many – particularly territorial brands created by natural parks – emphasize recycling and reusing.

Territorial brands could do more – for example, structuring value chains for circular design and use of by-products.

Source: Figge et al. (2021)

Territorial Brands and the 9Rs of circularity: A framework

Strategy	Definition	Territorial Brands (TBs) potential roles
R0 Refuse	Make product redundant by abandoning its function or by offering the same function with a radically different product	TBs could refuse to certify the products or processes more problematic from a sustainable perspective, or provide incentives to abandon their use or substitute them with better alternatives.
R1 Rethink	Make product use more intensive (e.g., by sharing product)	TBs could facilitate the sharing of capital goods among members.
R2 Reduce	Increase efficiency in product manufacture or use by consuming fewer resources and materials	TBs could facilitate adoption of more efficient production processes consuming fewer resources and materials.
R3 Reuse	Re-use by another consumer of discarded products which are still in good conditions and fulfil their original function	TBs could facilitate product re-use among its members or among consumers.
R4 Repair	Repair and maintenance of defective product so it can be used with its original function	TBs could refuse to certify products that do not ensure adequate repair and maintenance. TBs could also facilitate collect and repairing of products.
R5 Refurbish	Restore an old product and bring it up to date	TBs could facilitate refurbishing of old products.
R6 Remanufacture	Use parts of discarded product in a new product with the same function	TBs could require that certified products are designed for easy remanufacturing.
R7 Repurpose	Use discarded product or its parts in a new product with a different function	TBs could structure local value chains so that discarded products from one company are used as resources for other products.
R8 Recycle	Process materials to obtain thes ame (high grade) or lower (low grade) quality	TBs could require that member firms recyle more or facilitate the collection of goods for recycling.
R9 Recover	Incineration of material with energy recovery	TBs could facilitate incineration of material with energy recovery.

Source: Rinallo (2023) for the Made in the Alps project; based on the Kirchherr et al. (2017) framework.

5 roles Territorial Brands can play to accelerate the transition to the circular economy

1. Embedding circular principles in their product specifications

2. Training member firms to develop their circular capabilities

3. Re-assembling local value chains for greater circularity

4. Adding circularity to their communication to consumers with good storytelling

5. Act as a collective interface for funding requests

The 3 challenges that Territorial Brands need to overcome

1. **Motivating members to adopt more circular practices**
    - Raising awareness of the potentials of the circular economy
    - Training members to develop capabilities
    - Overcoming resistance to change
2. **Collaborate across administrative borders**
    - Locally available resources and skills are seldom available in sufficient quality and quantity, particularly in mountain regions. It is for example the case of wool or flax/linen, which often requires cross-border collaboration, even beyond Alpine countries.
    - Cross-border circular value chains may benefit from 'made in' or 'ingredient of origin' approaches to territorial branding.
3. **Obtain policy support**
    - Territorial brands should be beneficiary of targeted policy and funding support.
    - Cross-regional and cross-border collaboration should be supported – the 100% Local or National approach is not always the best solution.

Territorial brands can also play a role in the EUSALP Action Groups' Cross-Cutting Priority on the Circular Economy

During the third EUSALP Territorial Brand Conferences (2023), representatives of the EUSALP Action Groups 2, 3, 5, 6 and the Youth Council were involved in a roundtable discussing the role that territorial brands could play in the context of the EUSALP Cross-cutting Priority on the Circular economy.

Based on their input, the Made in the Alps project present possible roles for Territorial brands, based on each Action Group's role in the cross-cutting priority.

Action Group	Role in the cross-cutting priorit (source: Work Plans 23-24 EUSALP Action Groups)	Possible role of Territorial Brands (TBs)
1 Research & Innovation	AG1 will focus on how to scale up innovative solutions in AS and extend cross-border/transnational value chains (including in the bio-based sectors). AG 1 will also try to mobilise public and private stakeholders in the research, demonstration, and deployment of bio-based solutions.	TBs can act as catalyzers of or partner in innovation due to their capability to mobilize local public and private stakeholders. They can expose their members to circular innovations from other Alpine regions and can facilitate local adoption of these innovation. Through alliances with other brands, they can facilitate the creation of cross-border and transnational circular value chains.
2 Economic Development	AG2 will bring expertise in industrial activities, the textile sector, and the transition of SMEs to the CE through digitalisation (Circular4.0 Project). The goals are: to exchange information on circular economy initiatives in the Alps and build a circular and digital community; draft a EUSALP CE (& digitalisation) roadmap; and deploy local bio-economies across the Alpine Space.	TBs are territorial economic development initiatives. They can be mobilized to exchange information about good practices in circularity, and can permit to increase adoption of the tools developed in the Circular 4.0 project.
3 Labour market, education and training	AG3 will address circular economy aspects in educational curricula and life- long learning courses for relevant Alpine sectors (wood, agri-food, etc.). AG 3 will also create ad hoc courses for Vocational Education and Training (VET) institutions on soft and technical/professional skills required by sectors (i.e. wood, agri-food) that contribute to the circular economy, as well as lifelong learning courses for workers who cannot access higher education opportunities but require academic level knowledge.	TBs are already involved in upgrading the skills of their members in various areas through formal or informal training opportunities. This could be extended to skills related to the circular economy, addressing both member firms and their workers. TBs could also contribute through their member base to develop applied knowledge in relevant Alpine sectors such as wood, textile, and agrifood.

Action Group	Role in the cross-cutting priority (source: Work Plans 23-24 EUSALP Action Groups)	Possible role of Territorial Brands (TBs)
5 Connectivity and accessibility	AG5 will focus on the digitalisation of the circular economy via a dedicated workshop during the Digital Alps Conference.	TBs are in some cases already experimenting digital solution re. the optimization of value chains, the certification of origin, and digital storytelling through consumers. TBs also have a potential role in the EUSALP Cross-cutting priority on digitalization.
6. Natural and cultural resources	AG6 wants to build synergies with the Alpine Space project AlpTextyles, to raise the general public's awareness of territorial branding as a means to ensure the dissemination of circular approaches among SMEs in the Alpine regions and promote circularity in the Alpine textile value chains (valorisation of local resources, such as wool, linen, hemp, dyeing plants). AG6 also aims to stress the connection between circular economy and the protection of our cultural heritage, exploring possible links to UNESCO Intangible Cultural Heritage lists or Globally Important Agricultural Heritage Systems (GIAHS) and fostering a responsible use of water and wood.	The Made in the Alps projects showed that the shared image of the Alps is a cultural resource that can facilitate collaboration among TBs based on common symbolic elements. The Alps have been a laboratory of circularity long before the term was coined. The living heritage of the alps in food, textiles, agriculture and other Alpine value chains can be at the base of a culturally resonant 'Alpine way to circularity'. The AlpTextyles project already links circularity to territorial branding and through its planned event can facilitate the achievement of the EUSALP cross-cutting priority on the CE goals. Ongoing UNESCO inscription initiatives, such as the Alpine Food heritage, building on the Interreg Alpine Space project AlpFoodway, already include a circularity element.
7. Green Infrastructure	AG7 will mainly contribute by creating a synergy with the "Green Infrastructure goes business award"	TBs often emphasize the keeping or upgrading of green infrastructure (e.g., biodiversity, climate adaptation etc.) in their product specifications. The green infrastructure goes business award could be promoted through networks of TBs.
8. Risk Governance	AG8 will develop circular economy solutions for mitigating climate and environmental risks.	TBs might facilitate adoption of these solutions.
9. Energy	AG9 will focus on optimising of energy uses in the circular economy and renewable energy sources (solar, wind, hydrogen, biogas).	TBs might facilitate the optimization of energy uses and the adoption of renewable energy sources.

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