

“Brandscaping”: From Traditional Cultural Landscapes to “Label Regions”

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“Brandscaping”: From Traditional Cultural Landscapes to “Label Regions”

A Strategic Scheme to Achieve Sustainable Regional Development in the Swiss Alps

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Sustainable regional development is a long-term goal for Alpine landscapes and habitats in Switzerland. Areas of high ecological quality and sufficient socio-cultural potential, but insufficient economic power, are looking for long-term perspectives. The economic options of structurally weak peripheral regions could be improved significantly through “brandscaping,” ie a certification strategy for Label Regions focusing on sustainability, thereby “producing” new types of landscapes. An adequate implementation strategy should be based on a reliable indicator system, which

should finally lead to certification procedures for regional management. But the implementation of Label Regions (with certification) is only feasible under an innovative development scenario in which the socioeconomic and political environment facilitates such strategies. Labeling intends to offer regional producers an advantage in the nature-based tourism market as well as for other quality products and services, and must be effectively promoted by regional as well as sectoral policies, thus shaping traditional landscapes into “brandscapes.”

The challenge

The current situation regarding the Alpine cultural landscape is marked by a peculiar gap between ‘appreciation’ and ‘value creation:’ while the society at large and tourists in general still appreciate Alpine scenery in Switzerland, the Alpine landscape is losing its long-standing relevance as a source of production because of the changing focus of the economy. The main reason for this development lies in structural pressure and sharply increased economic competition since the beginning of the 1990s. The reflection of this development can be seen in demographic changes and in new production systems. Local economies—in particular in some valleys in the inner Alpine area which rely heavily on agricultural resources—face increasing challenges in their struggle for existence. Very low (or

even negative) population growth rates and a significant decline in job opportunities in these particular regions are becoming fairly visible effects.

At the same time, high transfer payments from the federal government flow into Swiss *mountain areas* in order to support mountain farming, which is rapidly losing its traditional role as a leading industry. In recent years, a simultaneous redesigning of the main goals and functions of *rural areas* has taken place, in the direction of an ecologically balanced environment and recreation area for urban agglomerations.

In addition, there is another problem to be solved: uncoordinated governmental sectoral policies (such as environmental policy, regional development policy, agricultural policy, etc). This problem complicates or even impedes focused, goal-oriented development under a well-defined guiding idea. With new programs, the federal government and the cantons (ie states) are looking for innovative ways of devising new solutions.

Development options: three types of regions

In order to identify the different development options for mountain areas, we need to differentiate between specific Alpine locations. Based on the present situation as a starting point, we propose a three-fold typology of development tracks, determined by specific framework conditions and location profiles (Figure 1):

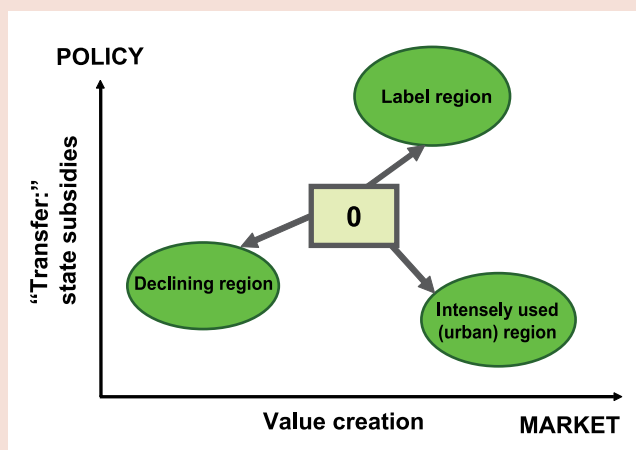


FIGURE 1 Three-fold typology of development tracks in the Swiss Alps.

1. The intensely used (urban) type is characterized by very busy tourism with quite large settlements, a broad infrastructure (classical skiing areas, hotel industry, traffic, etc) and an impressive economic performance (Figure 2);
2. The declining type is marked by a progressive fallback of agriculture, the steady decline and marked ageing of the population, abandoned settlements, and almost no tourist activity in such regions (Figure 3);
3. The third type is characterized by sustainable development and is called "Label Region." It features traditional agricultural land use and settlements, in combination with nature-based tourism (Figure 4).

The Label Region: a sustainable option

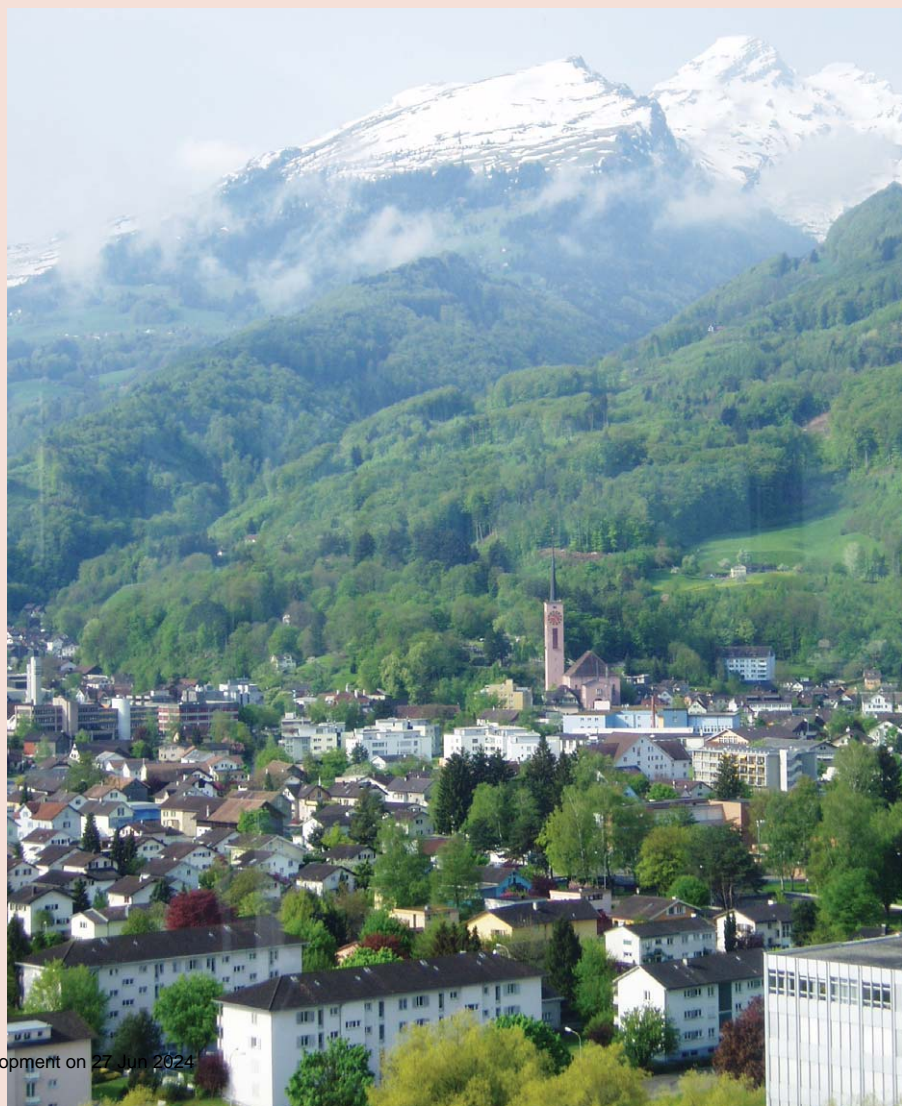
In what follows, we focus on the Label Region. First of all, we assume that without any regulating and supporting actions by the government, this sustainable type will have no chance: due to growing economic pressure, traditional "middle-of-the road" regions have but two options in a polarized future: Either they have enough potential to activate their resources through heavy economic development, attracting considerable investment, and eventually become an "intensely used" type of region. Or they will gradually shift into the "declining" type, with a fairly low economic activity profile due to the lack of competitiveness, and with only very limited investments from public or private investors.

The change in agricultural production towards tourist service regions poses a serious challenge to mountain areas. Future rural development must be managed in such a way that sustainable development goals are not just empty phrases but will be truly implemented. This is why we propose a scheme for sustainability certification of mountain areas and recommend the creation of Label Regions. In future, Label Regions should be favored when it comes to federal transfer payments. In the same way, these regions should benefit from the increasing market for sustainable products by implementing regional sustainability

strategies. Sustainable products are durable, high-quality products from socially responsible production lines, and environmentally friendly production and distribution processes; preferably they reflect the slogan "from the region ... for the region."

Corroborating this typology, scenario-based considerations also indicate that Swiss mountain regions may develop along highly different tracks. Some regions may have better outlooks because of their locational advantages and innovative strategies, while in others the economic and social prospects are for the worse. As a third option, the intended implementation of a Label Region strategy (with certification) is only feasible if there is some kind of agreement between metropolises and Alpine regions. In this manner, even less prosperous regions will be able to develop decently from a socio-

FIGURE 2 The city of Buchs, Switzerland, sees itself as a competitive business location. It can be characterized as an "intensely used urban type" of region. (Photo by Dominik Siegrist)



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FIGURE 4 Hasle in the Entlebuch UNESCO Biosphere Reserve, Switzerland. The region gives priority to conservation of natural and cultural landscapes and stimulates the local economy by involving the population. (Photo courtesy of Entlebuch UNESCO Biosphere Reserve)

economic point of view and without too much negative impact on the environment, provided they implement sustainable strategies effectively, and assuming that goal-oriented transfers (on the basis of performance-based contracts) are available in future.

It follows that an improvement of the allocation of transfer payments is neces-

sary. To this purpose, a concentration of transfers would be mandatory, with a focus on Label Regions. However, there are certain preconditions which must be met in order to successfully implement the Label Region strategy:

- The economic performance of the metropolises must be maintained or even increased in the context of international competition;
- Willingness to support mountain areas as a resource and compensation area must be maintained in a consistent and enduring manner by reliable political decisions;
- Mountain areas (in partnership with governmental and private institutions) must design appropriate strategies to achieve sustainable development, formulate targets, and agree on performance measures.

Certification of Label Regions

Sustainable development goals and a concept of certification for Label Regions have the potential to be a decisive tool for effective regional policy in mountain areas. The identification of Label Regions requires appropriate instruments to actually achieve the goal set, ie *sustainable regional development*. Otherwise the strategy will not be operational.

Certification in general has a long tradition. In scrutinizing experience, we distinguish between status- and process-oriented approaches. The advantages of a status-oriented system are accuracy and comparability of the data. The advantages of the process-oriented system are a participatory approach and the capture of dynamic endogenous processes. In order to combine the advantages of both systems, we developed a three-step method: a status-oriented quality rating system, a self-evaluation, and a process-oriented quality rating system are linked together in a comprehensive procedure (Figure 5).

In the pre-process phase, an applicant region receives all the important information about the certification procedure and the different requirements for certification. If the pre-process phase ends successfully and the region still wishes to become a Label Region, the main process

can start. In the main process, the two evaluation steps—process evaluation and performance evaluation—are carried out. Finally, after earning the label, the region must continuously improve its sustainability. After a certain time period of continuous improvement, the Label Region must go through the main process once again. Consistency and continuity of sustainable development in a region are monitored by the process-oriented character of the certification concept.

Usually, the objects of certification processes are enterprises, sequences of operations, services, or products. In contrast, this particular case evaluates whole regions regarding their sustainability performance. While it is quite simple to certify established sequences of production operations, there is a basic methodological problem with the definition of systems borders for the certification of whole regions. For example, it is hardly possible to quantify a steady flow of goods and commodities over the border of the region (as in earlier times with frontiers or a customs office). Such problems need to be resolved in future to achieve reliable and trustworthy results.

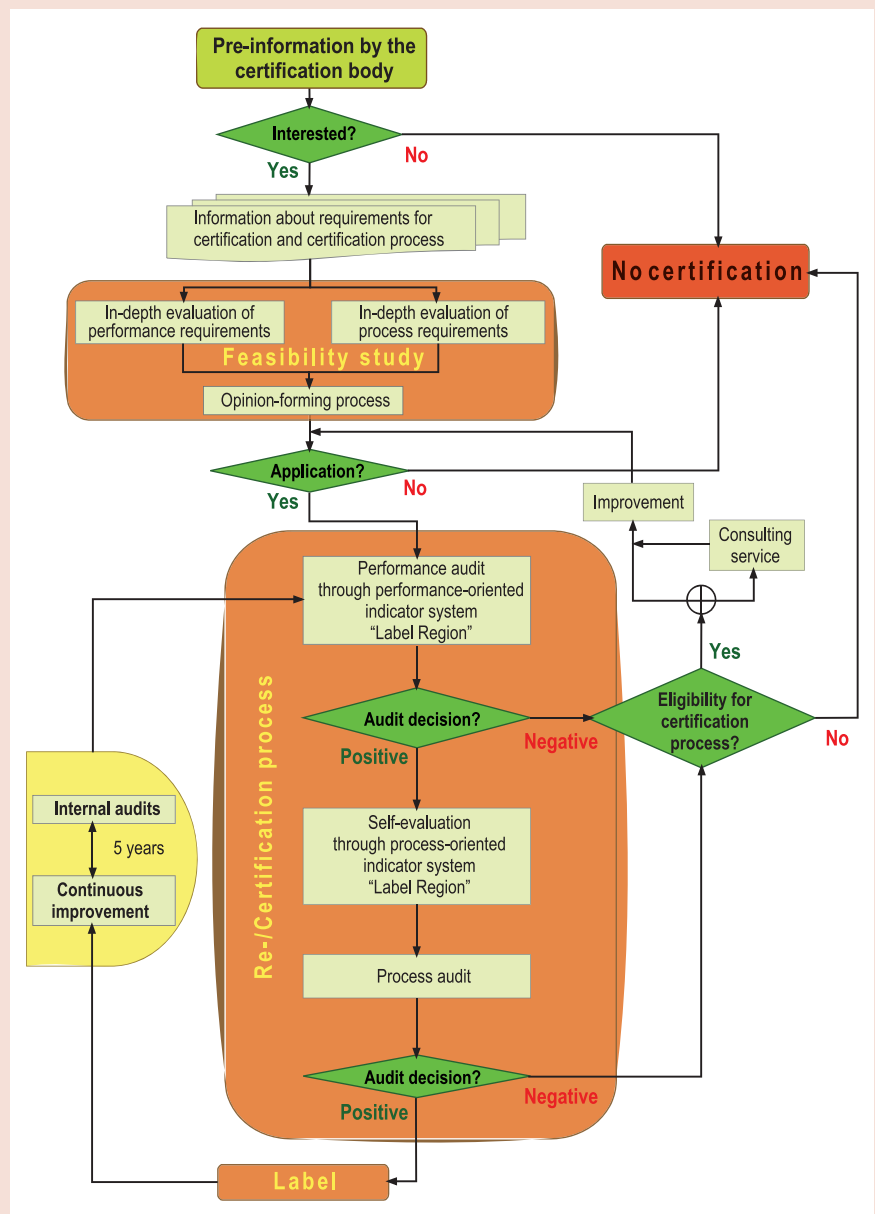
Because of the need for credibility, transparency, and comparability, as well as consistent handling, an independent certification authority should be set up. The label itself should be awarded by the federal government. Thus a high-level political agency has the option of maintaining the standard and would even be able to refuse a request for the label—for the sake of quality.

In a concrete case, a region-based multi-stakeholder team should be responsible for the certification process and should monitor the individual stages of the certification process, especially self-evaluation. The team should include representatives of local management, local experts, and other representative stakeholders, eg agriculture and forestry, tourism, and nature and landscape protection. The wide range of all relevant regional stakeholders, and a focus on communication, will ensure that all essential facets of the certification process are integrated. Thus, transparency of the project's operation will be guaranteed for the

different interest groups at each stage of the process.

Assuming that the number of certified Label Regions will grow in future, this strategy has the potential of contributing to a distinctive improvement of the whole “Alpine system.” The expected multiplier effects will result from the exchange of experience in the network, as well as from know-how transfer and spill-over among the Label Regions and beyond, gaining new clients in the long run.

FIGURE 5 Certification process for Label Regions.



Brandscaping: a label for the state and the market

Because the Label Region shows self-commitment throughout the certification process, it should receive preferential access to financial resources—within both regional policy schemes and other sectoral policies (such as agriculture)—and to private flows of money. This, then, is the overarching goal of the strategy.

At the same time the label is also intended to provide advantages in the market. This can apply to sustainable tourism, the marketing of regional, organic food, and specific local industries such as food processing, solar technology, and ecological construction or services in the health and social sectors (adolescents, wellness and regeneration tourism for the stressed generation, a rapidly growing market serving elderly people). The quality mark ‘Label Region’ may not always be market-effective by itself, but may support existing or newly created local products. In this manner, the product brands of single producers will be combined with the generic label, mutually reinforcing each other.

In conclusion, we realize that the perspectives of structurally weak peripheral regions could be improved by a certification strategy for Label Regions with a broad, goal-oriented and sustainable Swiss mountain area policy, provided consistent marketing of the label is achieved and combined with successful product brands.

However, the certification of a mountain area as a Label Region will not automatically guarantee thriving and sustainable development. Regions will also depend on potentials in human resources, such as innovation and entrepreneurship with strong product brands. The same is true for market success: Only if the consumers of these products realize the additional value of the new label will they agree to pay an adequate price. In this way, *added value* can be created out of *valuation*. For this reason, the Alpine landscape will be re-characterized, or even re-invented. We call this process “brandscaping,” referring to regional and landscape development as a result of the combined value of sustainability-oriented transfer payments and certified high-quality branded products.

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