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Managing the transition to hybrid work and satellite offices to revitalize remote mountain areas

Alpine Remote Areas' appetite for remote working

Many remote Alpine regions are experiencing population decline and ageing, while the urban-rural divide is widening. The small-scale project AlpSatellites analyses the opportunities and challenges of remote working with a view to attracting young people, workers and digital nomads to remote areas and integrating them into local communities.

The six project partners are: Valle d'Aosta University (UNIVDA), Unité des Communes valdôtaines Evançon (CME), Association Culturelle Sociale et Sportive du Queyras (ACSSQ), Aix-Marseille University (AMU), Vorarlberg University of Applied Sciences (FHV) and the Municipality of Doren.

The first stage in the AlpSatellites project has entailed engaging and consulting with local stakeholders in the target mountain areas and exploring their interest in remote working as a means of developing the local economy. Ten co-creation workshops have been held in Italy, Austria, and France, with a total of

around 200 online and live participants.

In Italy, four distinct groups of stakeholders were identified by project partner CME: local administrators and policymakers; local entrepreneurs; ordinary citizens from the Unité de Communes Valdôtaines Evançon; students at Valle d'Aosta University. These four groups met separately online to discuss remote and co-working solutions for helping communities to thrive. At a final workshop on 28 March 2023 in Verrès, 27 participants representing all four groups had the opportunity to share their different perspectives and learn from each other.

In France, local community involvement was implemented via a two-step process. First, between November 2022 and April 2023, bilateral meetings were held with key stakeholders from three areas: Briançonnais, Guillestrois-Queyras, and Pays des Ecrins. The stakeholders targeted by project partner ACSSQ at this stage were mainly local mayors and policymakers. Se-

cond, three further meetings were held, one per area, which brought together a range of key actors, including elected officials, local businesses, tourism services, NGOs, and remote workers.

The Austrian project team conducted three separate workshops. The first was designed to brief students, academic staff, and businesses about the Alpsatellites project. The second workshop, which was held online, involved 15 students and young workers, while the third was a live encounter with 25 mayors from the Bregenzwald Region.

At the end of the consultation phase, a national report was drawn up in each country, and the three reports were merged into the first deliverable of AlpSatellites, the transnational report: Alpine Remote Areas' appetite for remote working which is available in English at the following link: <https://www.alpine-space.eu/wp-content/uploads/2023/06/Alpsatellites-Disposables-2023-3-1.pdf>



A SWOT analysis (Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, Threats) was carried out at the various workshops with a view to identifying and assessing different aspects of remote working in Alpine settings. The World Café method was also used, both to maximize interaction among participants during face-to-face sessions, and to generate a relaxed and open atmosphere.

Among the barriers which need to be overcome, all three countries reported a significant gap between supply and demand in the housing market, in light of the pre-eminent role of second home tourism in mountain areas. Available housing solutions are often too small for families, in need of renovation, expensive and lacking adequate fibre-optic connectivity. Poor public transport and dependence on private vehicles were also identified as crucial issues across all territories. The quality of essential family services, such as nursery schools, activities for children, and youth centres, also needs improvement to attract teleworkers and slow down the exodus of families who already live in these areas.

Opportunities exist to build co-working spaces offering multiple services (shared cooking facilities, social and cultural activities, e-micro mobility, etc.) to a range of target groups. Three main target groups of remote workers have been identified: bleisure travelers, digital nomads, and new teleworking residents. For example, in less-developed touristic areas, there is scope to expand services for bleisure customers, including co-working spaces and personalised services. Families are often divided during school holidays as at least one parent must return home

to work during the week. Creating facilities suitable for remote working, even within existing accommodations, would allow families to stay together, increasing revenue and customer well-being. Furthermore, working remotely cuts down the need for commuting and, consequently, reduces both costs for

workers and CO2 emissions. This could be a crucial factor in encouraging repopulation and preventing the abandonment of many remote villages.

The table below briefly summarizes the results of the SWOT analysis.

Strengths	Weaknesses
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • beautiful surroundings • flexible working hours • outdoor activities after work • attachment to the community • reduced commuting times 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • seasonality • social isolation • lack of adequate transport services, family services and places for entertainment and socialising • high rents similar to tourist rents and rental properties difficult to find • Internet connection
Threats	Opportunities
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • social isolation • lack of integration with the local community 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • attracting new tourist markets • repopulation of the valleys • increased spending by workers • impact on the local economy

The next phase of the project will entail completing activity A1.2 (“Systematic analysis of the target territories’ level of readiness for remote working and identification of enabling conditions”) and initiating activity A 1.3., which will involve designing, with the input of local stakeholders, remote and co-working solutions for each participating region that reflect that area’s specific features and respond to the local needs that have emerged to date.



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