



Vibrant Mountain Communities

Regional Development in Mountains:
Realizing Potentials, Tackling Disparities

Sustainable Mountain
Development Series

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The high-mountain town of Mestia (1 500 m asl) in the Upper Svaneti region of Georgia, a UNESCO World Heritage site. Agriculture is a pillar of the region's economy (GTW/shutterstock.com)

The Aosta Valley's Smart Specialization Strategy

Thomas Dax, Tamara Cappellari and Massimo Lévêque

The European Commission's efforts to support lagging regions through Smart Specialization Strategies since 2014 have proven effective also in different mountain regions. In Italy's Aosta Valley, local actors have built on previous collaboration and agreed on strategic development priorities. They have created new organizational structures to promote synergies between technological innovation and socio-economic development.

The valley's capital city, Aosta, surrounded by high mountains (G. Allheilig)

The Aosta Valley, home to about 126 000 people, is the smallest region in Italy. Located in the country's north-west and bordering France and Switzerland, it lies at a linguistic and cultural crossroads and has the constitutional status of an autonomous region. The valley is home to high mountains, including the highest European peak, Mont Blanc (or Monte Bianco, in Italian). With its renowned ski areas, the Aosta Valley's economy is based mainly on tourism. And while the valley once boasted the country's third-highest GDP per capita, it was hard hit by the 2008 economic crisis and is still struggling to recover.

In 2014, the regional government embarked on the opportunity to develop a "Smart Specialization Strategy (S3)" (Box) under an EU-funded programme that enables regions to identify their own competitive advantages [1]. Accordingly, Aosta's resulting S3 proposes a long-term vision emphasizing the region's mountains as a unique asset. It aims at strengthening sectors where the mountainous territory has clear competitive advantages and at promoting innovation and sustainable development in the valley, involving businesses, research centres and civil society [2]. It also seeks to enhance regional partnership and trans-regional cooperation (with neighbouring regions, including France) to overcome structural weaknesses and restrictions. It focuses on three interconnected specialization areas: "Smart Mountain", "Excellent Mountain" and "Green Mountain" (Figure 1). The following specific technologies have been identified as enabling ingredients to develop the region as a "laboratory":

- Innovative ICT tools to support manufacturing systems, tourism and environmental management, and to improve residents' quality of life;



Smart Specialization Strategy (S3)

"Smart specialization" is a place-based approach to identify niche areas of competitive strength and to solve societal challenges. Conceived within the European Commission's Cohesion Policy, the approach aims at fostering innovation partnerships and entrepreneurial discovery processes. It emphasizes greater coordination and better alignment of resources and strategies between private and public actors from different levels of governance. The development and implementation of a Smart Specialization Strategy (S3) is supported by the European Structural and Investment Funds and national/regional funding [5, 6].

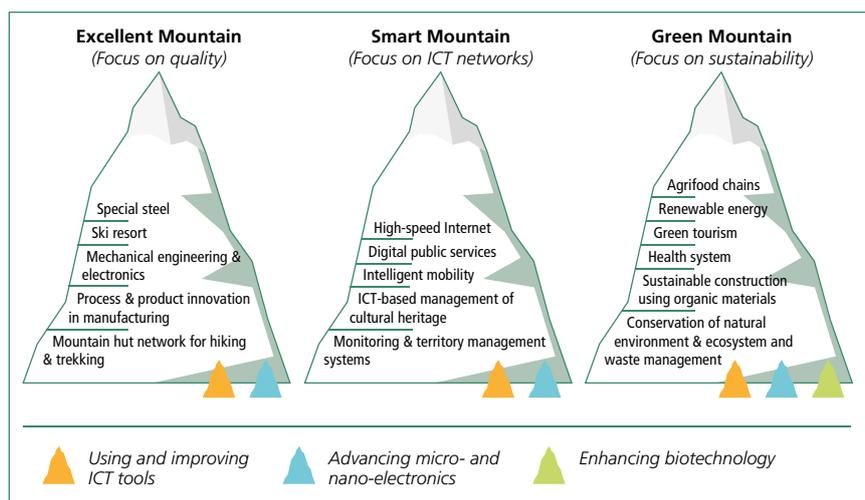


Figure 1. The three interconnected specialization areas under the Smart Specialization Strategy (S3) in the Aosta Valley, Italy

- Micro- and nano-electronics provide complementary components for smart ICT applications and offer opportunities for international cooperation among industries;
- New biotechnologies trigger innovations in agrifood chains and enhance the management of ecosystems and biodiversity.

The valley's S3 operational programme triggered public interventions of about €103 million between 2014 and 2020. It has also attracted additional support from other EU programmes, such as the European Regional Development Fund or the trans-regional innovation programme ALCOTRA [3]. The S3 programme has helped to support regional discourses and communication processes. It has also strengthened stakeholder consultation to develop an effective governance model that encourages investments in capacity building, technological development and diffusion of ICT-based solutions. Through these activities, it has stimulated user-oriented innovation, e.g. in the fields of energy efficiency, intelligent mobility, transport and territorial monitoring.

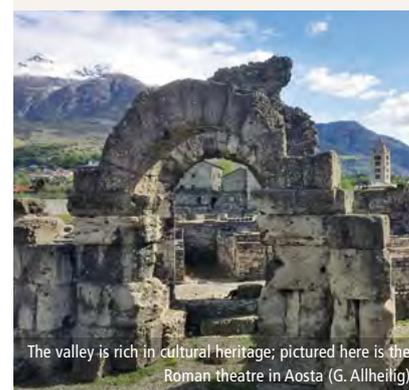
Through the S3 programme, the Aosta Valley is striving for progress on social and economic issues (Table 1). Issues of core concern that are monitored closely are increasing the level of research and development in the region as well as customer satisfaction and engagement of inhabitants. The regional authorities are highly committed and support local research institutions ("Centres of Excellence"), network building, involvement of intermediate bodies (e.g. associations representing manufacturing and service companies and the Chamber of Commerce), targeted communication actions and auditing activities. The S3 has also led to a diversification of the economy in the Aosta Valley.

Table 1. Selected impact indicators for S3 implementation (2013–2023). Notes: ¹⁾ 2016 ²⁾ 2019. Source: [2, 4]

Indicator	Baseline 2013	Mid-term assessment 2017	Target 2023
School dropout rate (%)	19.8	15.2	17.0
At least a Bachelor's degree in science or technology (%)	2.4	n.a.	4.0
Share of investment in research & development (in % of regional GDP)	0.57	0.68 ¹⁾	1.00
Value added of productive industry (% of regional GDP)	11.0	13.3	14.0
Export rate (% of regional GDP)	13.4	15.2	20.0
Enterprises with innovative products/processes (%)	29.3	28.3 ¹⁾	35.0
Enterprises with broadband access (%)	90	98.8 ²⁾	100

In the Aosta Valley, S3 has been driven and implemented by the highly committed regional government. The joint vision to harness the specific assets of the mountain location and put these to strategic and sustainable use ("Smart, Excellent, Green Mountain") has been a compelling argument bringing together the different stakeholder groups. The following factors have been decisive for effective implementation of the Strategy:

- The EU's financial support for S3, which in turn helped to mobilize other regional and national funding;
- Continued stimulation of awareness and participation of stakeholders; and
- Linking professional development and administrative support through regular consultations and working groups to improve mutual understanding and the details of the implementation process.



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Note: URLs were last checked on 23 September 2020.

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