Spatial population mobility and (cultural) sustainability in Alpine communities

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For a long time, in the late Middle and early New Ages, the population in many rural communities of the European Alps seemed almost stable. The historical-ecological research in these areas assumed a homeostatic equilibrium, established by a bundle of cultural practices, such as social regulations and specialised forms of land use. However, in some cases carrying capacity was exceeded and emigration of distinct population groups served as 'ultima ratio' to stabilise the local agri-social systems. Not until the age of industrialisation was this equilibrium finally destroyed when mass emigration transformed the traditional Alpine mountain farming population profoundly.

Now we can observe a trend reversal with 'new immigration', which in some regions of the French Alps started decades ago. However, this demographic process affects the Alpine regions unevenly in terms of both timing and intensity. Movements of specific groups with different motives for their mobility have a particularly strong influence on demographic structure, infrastructure development, local culture and customs as well as on the governance of local communities. One major phenomenon is the amenity migration of either new main residents or second home owners. In any case, in-migrants generally have more opportunities to influence local development in communities where autochthonous groups have been weakened numerically and/or economically.

The paper discusses in what way local sustainable development in Alpine municipalities is dependent on the described mobility trends and the role of 'culture' in the sustainability of these areas. It points out that culture clearly affects the relationship between socio-demographic, economic and even ecological sustainability and suggests that culture might be a steering component as different cultural practices lead to regionally diverse developments.

Keywords: European Alps, spatial population mobility, cultural sustainability, amenity migration