

## ***YOUrALPS: Integrating young people's concepts, educators' teaching principles and stakeholders' educational tasks for a transformation of education and society towards sustainability in the Alps***

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### **Abstract**

The EU Alpine Space project *YOUrALPS* enables the alpine youth to acquire the knowledge and develop the skills they want and need to better shape both their personal future and the one of the Alps. For a first time in history of environmental education and education for sustainable development, a trans-Alpine network of stakeholders is being created in order to synchronize measures and activities of formal and non-formal education in the Alps for instilling an up to date Alpine identity among Alpine youth.

### **Keywords**

Environmental education, education for sustainable development, key competences, action orientation, self-determination, participation, target group, protected areas

### **Introduction**

Global developments such as the depletion of natural resources, accelerating global warming or rapid demographic changes will pose challenges for mankind and require societal transformations. With their unique ecological, economic, and cultural value, mountain environments represent the complex interrelatedness and are essential to the survival of the global ecosystem. Especially young people (in mountain regions and lowlands) will not only be longer and more intensively confronted with these challenges but will also play a crucial role as future decision makers in business, politics and science. Among many other competencies and attributes, environmental awareness and nature-connectedness are key prerequisites to sustainable lifestyles.

*YOUrALPS* takes up the challenge to increase the sensibility and value of the alpine heritage especially among youth by better integrating related topics into the educational curricula and practices. In the context of *YOUrALPS*, extensive research involving multiple stakeholders has been undertaken in order to orientate future endeavors at the diverse needs of all key actors in Mountain-oriented education (MOE). This short paper at hand includes methodology, preliminary results and conclusions of the surveys as well as recommendations. It is assumed that a stronger coordination between formal and non-formal education represents a big potential for the sustainable valorisation of the Alps.

### **Methodology & Approach**

*"An open and flexible approach to learning that is both lifelong and life-wide"* is claimed to be crucial in a constantly changing world which is *"characterized by new levels of complexity and contradiction"* (UNESCO 2015). This given, formal and non-formal education have to work hand in hand in order to fulfil these requirements.

But how can these necessary objectives be achieved under the predominant circumstances and by respecting the needs of all stakeholders (students, teachers, institutions, etc.)?

How can young people's concepts, educators' teaching principles and stakeholders' educational tasks be integrated in order to lay the foundation for the transformation of education and society towards sustainability in the Alps?

A first step consists of an empirical study of four actor groups relevant for MOE:

- Internal survey among all project partners about their ideas and concepts of MOE
- Young beneficiaries from 10-30 who are the main target group of already existing/future activities and measures
- Involved practitioners in both formal and non-formal education sectors
- Responsible persons of NGOs, legacy, protected areas, etc. that are main decision-makers in the field

This mixed-methods research design in terms of data triangulation (Flick 2008) ensures a holistic approach to the object of investigation and aims at deepening and widening one's understanding of this object (Olsen 2004).

Main results of the empirical study can be regarded as input factors for the development of a so-called Alpine School Model in which all activities and measures of MOE are being bundled, theoretically underpinned and promoted for its future implementation and extension in various learning settings throughout the Alps. Due to the ongoing data collection only preliminary results of the young beneficiaries survey and interviews with involved educators can be presented in this paper.

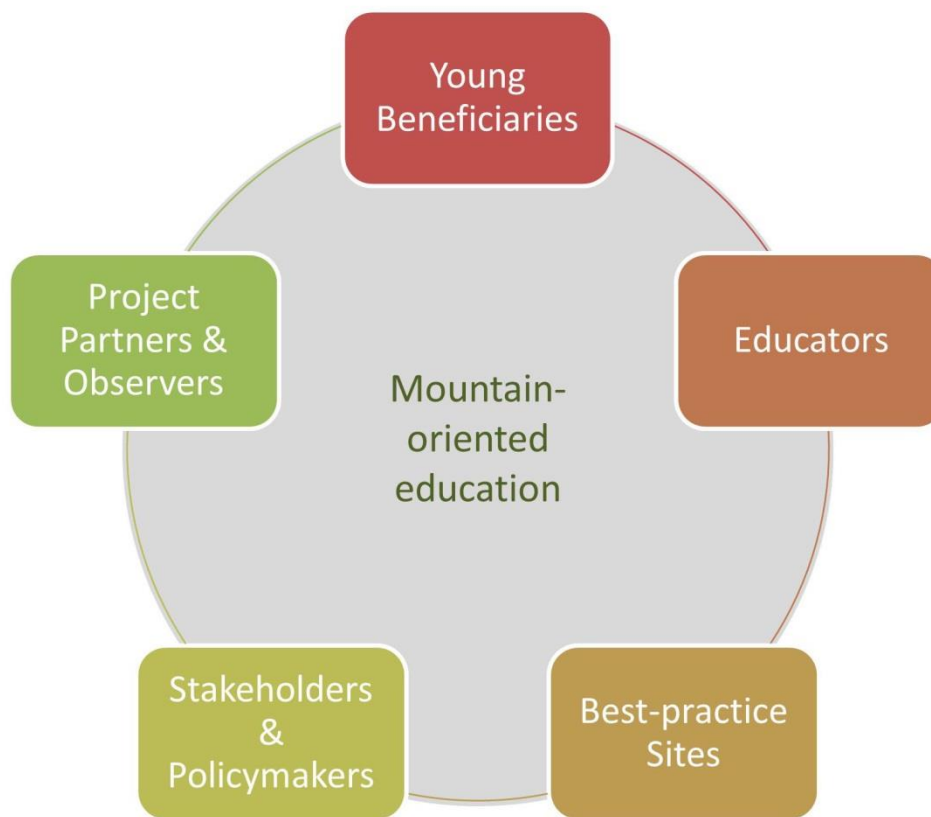


Figure 1: Multiperspective research on mountain-oriented education (own illustration)

## Preliminary results

### Young beneficiaries

In total 300 valid cases are included in the data evaluation process. By far most young beneficiaries are students at high schools or vocational schools. Valid statements can be made about Slovenia, tendencies about Austria and Italy. In France and Germany, the sample sizes are far too low to allow for any conclusions.

Young people regard their own future brighter than the future of the earth. The future of the Alpine Space is envisioned rather positive and positive. 10-14 year olds have a **more negative** outlook on the future of the Alpine Space than 15-19 year old teenagers. **Returning to a traditional lifestyle**, acquiring more knowledge and getting actively involved are regarded more important to tackle present and future challenges than technical solutions.

10-19 year old young people perceive the Alpine Space as 'Recreation area' (ca.35%), 'Living Space' (ca. 30%) or space for retreat (ca. 10%). The same subset perceives **protected areas very similarly to the Alpine Space**, except for one major difference: A considerable number also regards protected areas as 'learning locations'. Nature is predominantly regarded as an 'essential ingredient of life' and 'source of joy' by 15-19 year old young people. While humans are seen as part of nature by most young people (80%), they are not seen as having the right to make use of nature. **Nature conservation** is commonly regarded as **human obligation** and in some cases seen as **personal responsibility**. The sample does not allow for a clear picture about self-efficacy of young people. Responsibility for nature conservation is predominantly ascribed to businesses, NGOs and politicians – to a lesser extent to scientists.

'Enjoying untouched nature', 'seeing wild animals' as well as 'gaining knowledge' and 'spending time with family/friends' are the most common expectations of young people from protected areas. 'Walking on nature trails' and 'taking guided tours' are the most performed activities in protected areas. **Personal observations** are the most important source of knowledge about nature for young people before parents, school and experts.

### Involved educators

Stated learning objectives range from **abstract long-term goals** to concrete **detailed goals**. As has been yet established in formal education, there is a strong indication for a clear definition of micro and macro goals in the form of **learning outcomes** of each MOE-related activity also in non-formal education. Strong emphasis on the interrelation between internal and external influence factors of environmental friendly behaviour can be reported: Educators especially stress the importance of **role models**, **positive messages** and learning settings that allow for individual approaches and thus experienced self-efficacy in **confined fields of activity**.

Knowledge transfer is no longer sufficient to prepare alpine youth for future grand challenges. Educators place a strong focus on the development of **soft skills** which require different **evaluation methods** such as working diaries, portfolios, self-assessment or partner-assessment.

### **Discussion & future perspectives**

(Environmental) education is one of the major pillars of every protected area. First qualitative analyses in the course of this project reveal that learning settings in formal and non-formal education differ significantly. Evaluation of the closed-ended questions of the young beneficiaries survey shows ambiguous results of youth's concepts of nature as well as perceptions and approaches of the future and accompanying grand challenges. Involved educators emphasise the importance of a clear definition of learning outcomes also in non-formal education.

More target-group tailored, individual educational activities and measures on the part of non-formal education that incorporate more rigidly the two fundamental teaching principles self-determination and action-orientation are strongly indicated when considering young beneficiaries' preliminary concepts and perceptions of nature and the Alpine Space in the context of global change. At the same time, interviewed educators claim more standardised programmes in cooperation with non-formal education as in all Alpine countries, but strict requirements in the curricula only allow for minor room for not explicitly listed so-called soft and therefore hard to evaluate learning outcomes in connection with MOE. More light will be hopefully shed on this matter by means of a thorough analysis of national curricula and political strategies in the field of environmental educations in all participating countries as a next activity of the project timeline.

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