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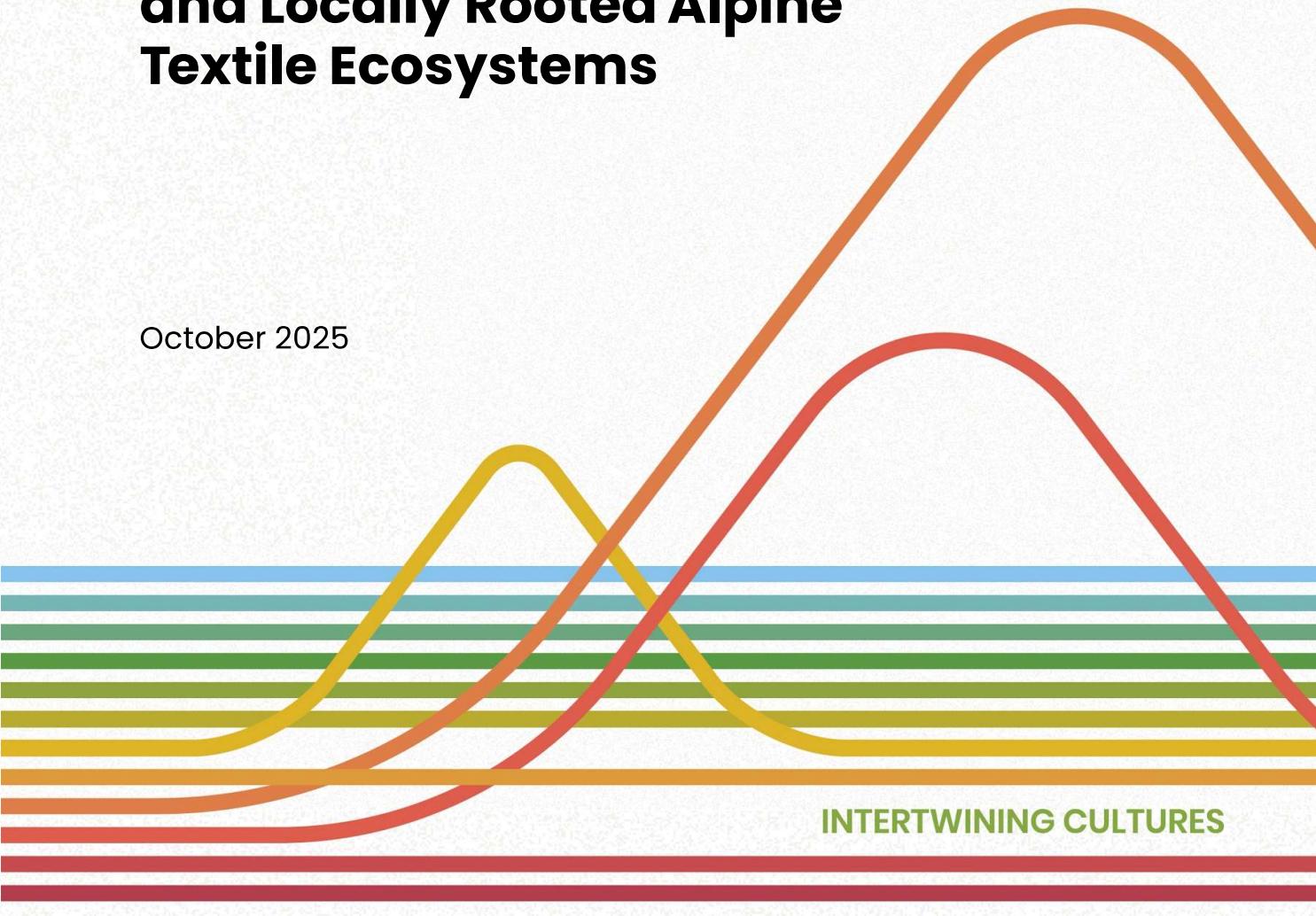
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Policy Brief

Towards Sustainable, Circular, and Locally Rooted Alpine Textile Ecosystems

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INTERTWINING CULTURES

Executive Summary

The Alpine region holds a rich textile heritage rooted in local aesthetics, natural fibers such as wool, hemp, linen and dye plants, and traditional circular practices. Today, as consumers grow increasingly critical of globalized supply chains and seek products that are both environmentally and culturally sustainable, this heritage represents a unique opportunity. It can serve as the foundation for re-localized, high-value textile value chains that justify premium pricing for "Made in the Alps" goods.

The AlpTextyles project was launched to accelerate this transition by developing collaborative solutions for sustainable, circular, and place-based textile production in the Alpine area. The project brought together actors from the cultural, agricultural, and industrial sectors to build new cross-border value chains rooted in Alpine traditions and innovation.

Key findings from the AlpTextyles mapping activities reveal a diverse yet fragmented landscape of textile knowledge, resources, activities, and skills, with significant potential for reterritorialization and market interest in sustainable, heritage-linked products. Pilot Activities confirm the feasibility of circular practices using regional materials, and highlights consumer willingness to pay more for authentic Alpine products.

This policy brief provides strategic recommendations for both regional and macro-regional stakeholders, including EUSALP Action Groups, to support sustainable Alpine textile chains. It links directly to the EU Strategy for Sustainable and Circular Textiles and anticipates regulatory developments on Geographical Indications for craft and industrial products. Coordinated efforts at multiple governance levels are now essential to unlock the Alpine region's full potential as a leader in sustainable, heritage-sensitive textile production.

1. Introduction

The Alpine region boasts a centuries-old textile tradition shaped by its geography, natural resources, and community-based practices. Wool, hemp, linen and locally sourced dye plants have historically formed the basis of resilient textile systems that combined craftsmanship, ecological balance, and cultural identity. Today, these traditions offer not only cultural value but also economic and environmental potential in the context of sustainable development.

However, Alpine textile ecosystems face serious challenges. The global shift toward delocalized, industrial-scale production has weakened local supply chains, leading to the loss of skills, infrastructure, and intergenerational knowledge. Moreover, globalized textile systems have imposed high environmental costs through long-distance transport, intensive resource use, and waste generation. Policy responses across Alpine countries remain fragmented, limiting opportunities for coordinated action and innovation.It should also be noted that the craft sector, although vital for Alpine identity and strongly linked to tourism and cultural value, is not as well represented at the political level as the industrial sector. Supporting crafts requires dedicated policies, inspired for example by the Italian biodistricts, which connect stakeholders from different valleys and reinforce the role of craftsmanship in synergy with sustainable tourism.

The AlpTextyles project addresses these challenges by promoting cross-border, circular textile value chains that are deeply rooted in Alpine heritage. It seeks to strengthen local production systems, foster sustainable consumption, and contribute to broader European strategies such as EUSALP and the EU Strategy for Sustainable and Circular Textiles. Through mapping activities

and pilot projects, the initiative demonstrates how heritage-sensitive innovation can support a just and green transition in the Alpine space.

2. Insights from the AlpTextyles project mapping : Alpine Textile Heritage and Industry

2.1 Heritage Overview

The Alpine region is home to a deep-rooted textile heritage shaped by its mountainous landscape, local materials, and traditional knowledge. Techniques such as wool processing, hemp and flax weaving, and the use of natural dyes reflect a long-standing culture of resource efficiency and circularity. These traditions continue to inspire contemporary artisans and small-scale producers, anchoring modern textile practices in a strong cultural identity.

2.2 Current Industry Status

The textile sector in the Alpine region features a dynamic and resilient industrial fabric, combining a strong clothing sector with leading innovations in technical textiles. This is particularly evident in Northern Italy, notably in Piedmont and Lombardy, with their rich tradition in wool, and in France's Auvergne-Rhône-Alpes region, home to many industrial producers and headquarters. The ecosystem thrives on the synergy between large international companies, which bring advanced technologies and market insights, and a dense network of SMEs and micro-enterprises, whose specialized skills, adaptability, and strong ties to local heritage create a collaborative environment where tradition and innovation coexist.

Local communities play an equally vital role. Their long-standing practices and knowledge, passed down across generations, remain deeply connected to mountain territories. As custodians of traditional techniques and cultural heritage, they complement industrial and technological capacities, enriching the sector with authenticity, place-based identity, and continuity. By adapting these traditions to contemporary needs, they provide cultural depth as well as opportunities for innovation and differentiation in competitive markets.

References to "the Alps" are common in marketing, as highlighted by the analysis of Alpine trademarks (AlpTextyles, 2024). However, this often results in a form of "Alpwashing," where the regional image is emphasized while the actual origin of resources—such as wool from autochthonous breeds—remains obscured under generic "Made in" or brand-origin narratives. Insights from the study *Consumers' Perceptions of "Made in the Alps" Textile Products* reveal that while consumers attach strong symbolic value to the Alpine brand, awareness gaps, price sensitivity, and risks of "greenwashing" persist. The absence of frameworks that formally recognize traditional knowledge and sustainable practices further creates confusion for consumers and limits SMEs' ability to leverage regional identity authentically.

These perception challenges reflect broader structural issues within the sector. Despite its vitality, the industry operates within a complex regulatory and institutional landscape. Governance remains fragmented across borders and sectors, and while references to "the Alps" are widespread, there is no unified system that formally links products to their Alpine origin or explicitly acknowledges sustainability and the cultural value of traditional techniques. At the same time, environmental challenges—including resource-intensive processes, waste generation, and dependence on global transport—remain significant, particularly in peripheral or isolated areas

where infrastructure limitations exacerbate economic and ecological pressures. The AlpTextyles pilots have demonstrated practical solutions, showing that circular production models based on local resources can help overcome isolation and foster sustainable alternatives.

2.3 Opportunities

Mapping activities highlighted several key opportunities for strengthening the Alpine textile ecosystem:

- **Re-territorialization of value chains**: Strengthening local supply chains and reestablishing regional production hubs can support economic resilience and environmental sustainability.In the textile sector, however, re-territorialization should not be interpreted as the creation of fully self-sufficient local systems, which are hardly feasible at an industrial scale given the complexity of the industry. Rather, it should be understood as a strategy to leverage the specific territorial specializations that exist across different Alpine regions and to foster cross-border collaboration in order to build resilient and sustainable value chains. This perspective is closely aligned with the founding principles of the AlpTextyles project, which emphasizes the ecological, cultural, and economic interdependencies of Alpine territories. By moving beyond a narrow national approach, such as the constraints often imposed by current "Made in" frameworks privileging national industries, it becomes possible to unlock significant opportunities for SMEs, enhance synergies across the region, and establish a more coherent Alpine-wide identity in textile production.

- **'Made in the Alps' positioning**: A coordinated branding and labeling strategy could enhance the market visibility and distinctiveness of Alpine textile products, while also ensuring appropriate recognition of the territories, production practices, traditional knowledge, and bearers involved. Rather than establishing a formal 'Made in the Alps' certification, which may be restrictive and administratively burdensome, it is more appropriate to support SMEs in developing their own strategies to highlight local value—encompassing human, territorial, intellectual, traditional, and natural resources—thereby fostering synergistic production networks and integrated governance across production chains. This can include branding products as locally produced or emphasizing the use of resources and traditional knowledge sourced from the Alpine region. Such an approach strengthens regional identity while remaining flexible and inclusive.

Given that rules for geographical brands differ significantly across Alpine countries, it is essential to encourage national and local authorities to actively support the development of territorial forms of branding, including innovative tools such as narrative labels. In this context, the emerging framework of geographical indications (GIs) for non-agricultural products represents an additional opportunity to provide legal recognition and market protection for Alpine textiles, reinforcing their authenticity and link to place. By combining more flexible branding instruments with the potential of GIs, SMEs can better communicate the sustainability, cultural value, and distinctiveness of their products, while adapting to the diverse legal frameworks of Alpine regions.

- **Improved governance and networks**: Enhancing the coordination and efficiency of regional actor networks could empower Alpine textile stakeholders and improve their bargaining position. It would also ensure that the diverse skills of all territorial actors are effectively leveraged and their interactions structured, thereby consolidating a solid, long-term strategic posture and fostering sustainability alongside meaningful engagement with relevant stakeholders.

- **Environmental innovation**: Promoting tools such as Life Cycle Assessment (LCA) and adapting environmental classifications would not only align the sector with EU sustainability goals and increase transparency for consumers, but also make it possible to better recognize and valorize the comparatively higher sustainability of locally and regionally produced and processed natural fibers, especially when contrasted with synthetic alternatives that typically rely on globalized production and have a larger environmental footprint. In this context, the recognition and integration of traditional Alpine textile practices, combined with innovation, form a cornerstone for ensuring sustainable development and consolidating the sector's long-term environmental and cultural value.

By addressing these challenges and capitalizing on its cultural and industrial strengths, the Alpine region is well-positioned to become a model for sustainable, heritage-sensitive textile production in Europe.

(Source: Lambracht & Chilla (2024): Mapping Alpine wool)

(Source: Diego Rinallo & Marta Pizzetti (2024) : The Image of the Alps in Textile Branding and Communication)

(Source: Diego Rinallo & Marta Pizzetti (2024) : Consumers' Perceptions of "Made in the Alps" Textile Products)

3. Findings from Pilot Actions and Lessons Learned

3.1 Innovations Tested

The AlpTextyles pilot actions explored practical pathways to implement circular and heritage-sensitive textile production in the Alpine region. These initiatives focused on:

- **Circular product development** using regional fibers and natural dyes, including wool and plant-based coloring materials sourced within Alpine territories.

- **Cross-sectoral collaboration** between cultural institutions, textile producers, knowledge-holding and practicing communities, farmers, and designers to integrate traditional knowledge with contemporary production and design methods.

- **Respectful ways of using textile traditional knowledge and traditional cultural expressions,** grounded in the consent of bearer communities, proper acknowledgement, and compensation, drawing on internationally established frameworks such as the Cultural Intellectual Property Right's initiatives 3C rules (Consent, Credit, and Compensation), the World Intellectual Property Right's Draft Steps When Considering the Use of Elements of Indigenous Peoples' Traditional Cultural Expressions in Fashion, and UNESCO's Draft guidance note on economic dimensions of intangible cultural heritage safeguarding.

These pilots demonstrated the feasibility of producing textiles that are both locally sourced and environmentally sustainable, while also carrying cultural and symbolic value.

3.2 Outcomes

The pilot phase provided valuable insights into both the technical and social dimensions of circular textile production in the Alps:

- Feasibility: Regional raw materials—especially wool—proved suitable for quality textile production, with promising results in terms of environmental performance and cultural relevance.

- Consumer perceptions: Market feedback revealed a growing interest in Alpine products perceived as authentic, sustainable, and locally made. Many consumers expressed a willingness to pay a premium for products with clear territorial identity and environmental benefits.

- Collaboration potential: The pilots highlighted the importance of bridging gaps between different sectors—cultural, industrial, and agricultural—and among various stakeholders, to activate new, place-based value chains.

These findings confirm that Alpine regions possess both the resources and the creative capacity to foster sustainable textile innovation grounded in local identity. However, they also underline the need for structural support in areas such as funding, certification, and network-building to scale up these initiatives.

(Source: Diego Rinallo & Marta Pizzetti (2025) : Communicating Value to Consumers)

4. Policy Context

The transformation of the Alpine textile sector toward circularity and territorial rootedness aligns closely with several key policy frameworks at both European and macro-regional levels. These frameworks provide strategic guidance, regulatory incentives, and implementation mechanisms that can support the development of sustainable and heritage-sensitive value chains across the Alps. Many of these instruments, detailed in the Annex (A.1–A.7), offer concrete tools to operationalize circular and traceable production practices.

EU Strategy for Sustainable and Circular Textiles
The European Commission's Strategy for Sustainable and Circular Textiles (2022) sets out a comprehensive vision to make textiles more durable, recyclable, and locally produced. It emphasizes transparency, product stewardship, and the reduction of environmental impacts throughout the value chain. Instruments such as the **Digital Product Passport (DPP, A.3)** and **Product Environmental Footprint (PEF, A.4)** provide practical mechanisms to implement these principles, enabling traceability of materials, reporting of environmental performance, and verification of circular practices at the product level. The AlpTextyles approach—based on regional fibers, circular design principles, and local know-how—offers a direct and practical implementation pathway for this strategy within the Alpine context, in alignment with **Safe and Sustainable by Design (SSbD, A.7)** principles to ensure safe, sustainable, and circular product development.

Geographical Indications for Craft and Industrial Products
The forthcoming EU regulation on Geographical Indications (GIs) for non-agricultural products represents a significant opportunity for the Alpine textile sector. By recognizing the link between product quality, local heritage, and geographic origin, the regulation could serve as a powerful tool to promote authentic "Made in the Alps" textiles. Compliance with **Extended Producer Responsibility (EPR, A.1)** and integration with **Taxonomy Regulation (A.6)** criteria can further reinforce territorial authenticity, sustainability, and traceability, ensuring that GI products not only reflect heritage but also meet environmental and circularity standards. Such recognition strengthens consumer trust, acknowledges and protects the value of traditional knowledge, and enables local producers to command fair market value.

Existing Framework for Foodstuffs and Byproducts
It is also worth noting that under the current EU regulation on foodstuffs, wool—classified as an

animal byproduct—could already fall within the scope of geographical indications. This means that, even before the adoption of the new regulation on non-agricultural products, there is an existing legal pathway that could allow for the protection and valorization of Alpine wool under the GI framework. Linking this approach with **CSRD (A.5)** reporting mechanisms and **DPP (A.3)** traceability tools allows producers to demonstrate compliance, sustainability, and heritage protection simultaneously, creating a transparent and verifiable value chain from farm to final product.

Establishing a Geographical Indication for Alpine wool would generate several key benefits for the sector:

- **Market differentiation and competitiveness**: A GI would clearly distinguish Alpine wool from imported alternatives, often produced with lower environmental and social standards. This recognition would allow producers to justify premium pricing and position their products within high-value, sustainable markets.

- **Protection of authenticity and heritage**: By legally binding the product to its territory of origin, a GI would safeguard the traditional practices, breeds, and techniques that characterize Alpine wool. This protection would prevent the misuse of terms such as "Alpine" in marketing campaigns lacking a genuine territorial link.

- **Stronger consumer trust**: Transparent certification of origin and production methods would address current confusion in the market and give consumers confidence that they are purchasing textiles with verifiable Alpine provenance.

- **Support for local communities**: A GI could provide new income opportunities for small-scale producers, herders, and artisans, reinforcing the role of mountain communities as custodians of traditional knowledge. By enhancing the perceived value of their wool, the GI would help secure fairer remuneration across the value chain.

- **Alignment with sustainability goals**: Alpine wool production is inherently tied to extensive grazing practices that contribute to biodiversity, landscape maintenance, and cultural continuity. Embedding these values into a GI framework would highlight the positive externalities of wool production and link them to EU priorities on green transitions and sustainable regional development.

In this sense, Alpine wool could become one of the first emblematic cases to show how geographical indications in non-agricultural sectors can serve as levers not only for competitiveness, but also for sustainability and heritage preservation.

EUSALP Action Plan and Macro-Regional Synergies

The EU Strategy for the Alpine Region (EUSALP) provides an integrated governance framework that encourages cross-border cooperation and sustainable development across seven Alpine countries. Several EUSALP Action Groups (AGs) are directly relevant to the objectives of AlpTextyles:

- **AG2 (Economic Growth and Innovation)**: Supports regional economic development and the emergence of resilient, place-based industries.

- **AG3 (Labour Market, Education and Training)**: Promotes skill development and the transition to sustainable economic models.

- **AG6 (Natural Resources and Cultural Heritage)**: Fosters the conservation and valorization of Alpine cultural and natural assets.

- **Cross-cutting Priority 4**: Boosting Circular Economy

The AlpTextyles project contributes concrete solutions that can feed into the implementation of these priorities, particularly by offering models for interregional collaboration, policy integration, and heritage-based innovation.

5. Strategic Recommendations

The transition toward sustainable and heritage-sensitive textile value chains in the Alpine region requires coordinated action across governance levels. The following recommendations are tailored to the roles and competences of regional authorities and EUSALP Action Groups, with additional suggestions under Cross-cutting Priority 4 to promote effective governance and policy integration.

For Regional Authorities

1. Department of Agriculture

- Support the cultivation and processing of natural fibers (wool, hemp, linen, dye plants) through targeted subsidies and agri-environmental schemes, especially in the case of fibers from autochthonous animal breeds and plant varieties.

- Encourage multifunctional farming models that combine fiber production with tourism and landscape stewardship.

- Develop rural development programs that integrate textile crops into biodiversity and soil protection strategies.

- Facilitate cooperation between farmers, artisans, and SMEs to strengthen short supply chains and ensure fair value distribution.

2. Department of Industry

- Create dedicated funding lines for SMEs investing in eco-design, circular production, and sustainable technologies for textile processing.

- Incentivize industrial clusters to collaborate with craft sectors, universities, and research centers to merge tradition and innovation in ways that respect the traditional knowledge and traditional cultural expressions of the bearer communities.

- Promote national strategies for the international branding of Alpine textiles, aligned with EU sustainability frameworks and geographical indications.

- Introduce tax relief or credit schemes for companies that demonstrate measurable progress in reducing their environmental footprint, enhancing resource efficiency, and contributing to local value creation.

3. Policy Development

- Formulate regional textile strategies that explicitly integrate agricultural, cultural heritage, and sustainability objectives. Embedding **EPR (A.1)** and **Taxonomy Regulation (A.6)** into these strategies ensures long-term alignment with EU goals and provides a structured framework for funding and compliance.

- Establish policy frameworks to support the re-territorialization of textile production, including land use planning for fiber resources, the safeguarding of traditional techniques, and the recognition of their bearers. The application of **DPP (A.3)** could reinforce such frameworks by enabling traceability and recognition of locally rooted production methods.

4. Funding

- Create targeted funding schemes to support SMEs and micro-enterprises adopting circular practices, including investment in eco-design, the production and use of local textile raw materials and fibers, and short supply chains. By linking funding criteria to the **Taxonomy Regulation (A.6)** and **SSbD (A.7)**, these schemes can guarantee that resources are directed toward practices with proven sustainability value.

- Facilitate cross-border projects that promote cooperation among textile actors, including joint research initiatives and shared infrastructure. Concrete examples include collaborative solutions for wool collecting, storage, and washing, which represent critical bottlenecks for the valorisation of Alpine fibers. Integrating **EPR (A.1)** and **CSRD (A.5)** elements into these projects can improve accountability and ensure that shared infrastructures support transparent, fair, and measurable outcomes.

5. Capacity Building

- Develop training programs focused on traditional textile crafts that actively involve the skills and competencies of knowledge holders, sustainable design, and circular production methods, in collaboration with vocational institutions, cultural organizations, and bearer communities.

- Support knowledge transfer between generations and between traditional artisans and emerging entrepreneurs by prozmoting training opportunities, establishing partnerships that engage artisans and students in medium- and long-term educational processes, and ensuring appropriate recognition and credit to knowledge holders in the development of such transmission initiatives.

For EUSALP Action Groups

Action Group 2 – Economic Growth and Innovation

EUSALP Action Group 2 focuses on identifying and supporting key economic sectors in the Alpine region, with a strong emphasis on innovation and the competitiveness of small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs). Within the textile sector, AG2 can play a crucial role by:

- **Promoting cross-border market access platforms**: Support the creation of transnational platforms that facilitate access to domestic and international markets for Alpine textile SMEs. These platforms should prioritize sustainability, traceability, and territorial branding to enhance competitiveness and consumer trust.