

avenir debate

Central Valleys: The Backbone of Development in Switzerland's Mountain Regions

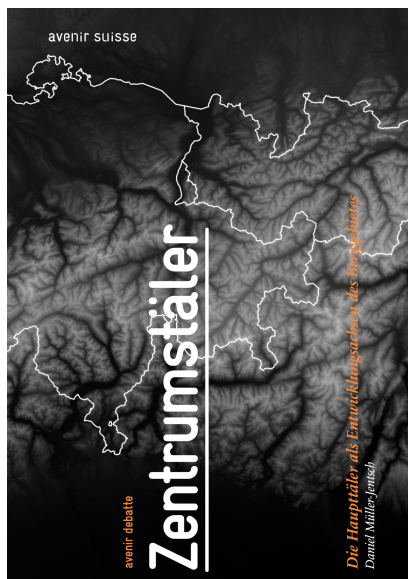
Remote mountainous areas are falling behind as the towns and cities of the central plateau drive Switzerland's growth. In the latest publication from Avenir Suisse, Daniel Müller-Jentsch argues that the key to the future development of the mountainous half of the country lies in the big main valleys. These central valleys serve as transport corridors, urban centers, and sources of innovation rolled into one. They form the backbone of a skeleton of side valleys that supports the whole alpine hinterland. The study analyzes the specific features of these ribbonlike built-up areas and describes strategies that could help the central valleys unleash their full potential as the backbone of development in alpine regions.

In Switzerland the population and economic activity are increasingly concentrated in the urban areas of the central plateau, while many far-flung regions struggle with out-migration and structural change. All ten cities with a population of more than 50,000 are outside the mountainous half of the country. This raises the question of what kind of conditions remote valleys and higher-altitude regions of the Alps – and Jura – would require to develop economically in the long term. In the new study from Avenir Suisse, land-use planning expert and Adjunct Fellow Daniel Müller-Jentsch outlines a strategic framework of action for the alpine regions.

His approach revolves around the central or “backbone” valleys: the Rhone, the alpine Rhine, the Gotthard, and Graubünden. These central valleys have the population and economic power of a substantial city, but a series of structural peculiarities frequently undermine their ability to function as a true center: their populations are sparse, and they lack an urban core that would drive political integration. They are often organized on a decentralized basis and are politically fragmented. This inhibits the willingness of the communities involved to cooperate, and often leads to petty local rivalry. Instead of trying to connect with the centers of the Mittelland plateau, mountainous regions should pay more attention to their own centers, reinforcing and developing their core functions, and place more emphasis on their special qualities that could give them the edge in competition with the cities of the central plateau.

There are many different ways of making the main alpine valleys more attractive as places to live and do business and thus boost their function as a center of life in the mountainous hinterland. Possible approaches could include trying out axially linked transportation systems, designating cross-municipal commercial areas, joining forces to offer vocational training, town planning competitions for hotspots of housing sprawl along the valleys, holding annual valley conferences, and opening the federal government's agglomeration programs to the special needs of the central valleys. The aim of all these measures would be to better exploit synergies between main and side valleys and create new perspectives for alpine communities.

Structural weaknesses also have to be addressed to harness the central valleys' full potential. This in turn involves formulating strategies on the basis of separate development models for the backbone valleys. Until now, Switzerland has had a polar central place model geared to the urban centers. This should be augmented to create a spatial concept for the whole of the country that also incorporates the idea of axial agglomerations to cover the mountainous regions as well. Just as other countries (such as the Netherlands and Denmark) have adopted central place models with their own specific geometry, Switzerland needs a model that takes account of its alpine structure.



Media conference: Thursday, 9 July 2020, 9.30am, Swiss Alpine Museum, Helvetiaplatz 4, 3005 Bern, with Daniel Müller-Jentsch, Samuel Rutz, and Verena Parzer-Epp.

Publication: avenir debatte: “Zentrumstäler: Die Haupttäler als Entwicklungsachsen des Berggebiets” (Central Valleys: The Backbone of Development in Switzerland's Mountain Regions), by Daniel Müller-Jentsch, avenir debatte, 74 pages, including [comprehensive appendix](#) with maps. [Available online from 9.30am at <https://www.avenir-suisse.ch/publication/zentrumstaeler/>](#)

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