

Vibrant Mountain Communities

Regional Development in Mountains:
Realizing Potentials, Tackling Disparities

Sustainable Mountain
Development Series

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publications.cde@unibe.ch

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Editors: Susanne Wymann von Dach (CDE), Fernando Ruiz Peyré (IGF, OeAW)

Authors and advisory expert: see list on pp. 49–50

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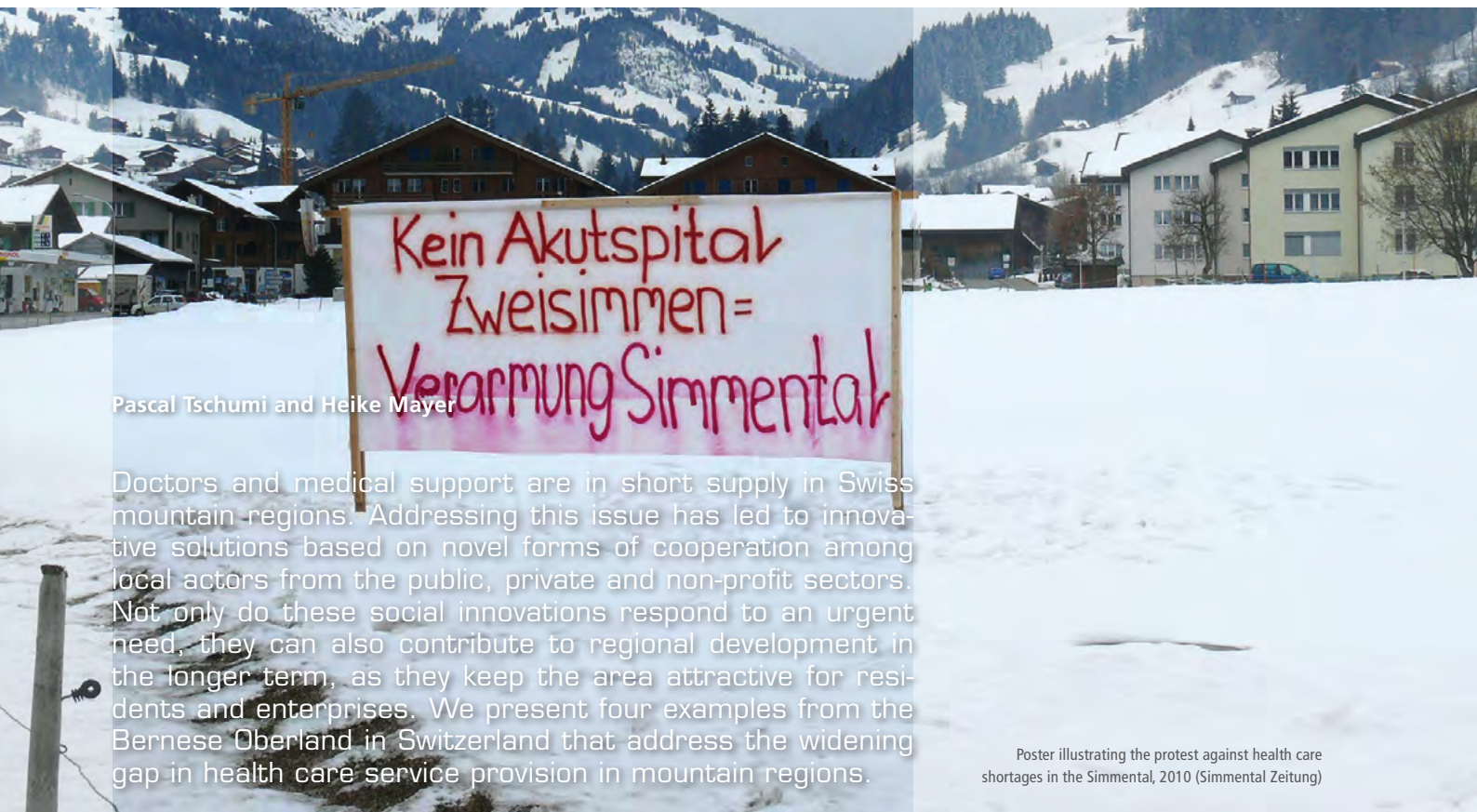
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The high-mountain town of Mestia (1 500 m asl) in the Upper Svaneti region of Georgia, a UNESCO World Heritage site. Agriculture is a pillar of the region's economy (GTW/shutterstock.com)

Addressing health care shortages through social innovations in the Bernese Oberland



Pascal Tschumi and Heike Mayer

Doctors and medical support are in short supply in Swiss mountain regions. Addressing this issue has led to innovative solutions based on novel forms of cooperation among local actors from the public, private and non-profit sectors. Not only do these social innovations respond to an urgent need, they can also contribute to regional development in the longer term, as they keep the area attractive for residents and enterprises. We present four examples from the Bernese Oberland in Switzerland that address the widening gap in health care service provision in mountain regions.

Poster illustrating the protest against health care shortages in the Simmental, 2010 (Simmental Zeitung)

As a result of national trends such as rising health care costs and falling numbers of general practitioners (GPs) and other skilled workers, the supply of health care has become a problem in almost all Swiss mountain regions. While rural areas in general are affected, the mountains, disadvantaged by their remoteness, are particularly hard hit: residents as potential patients and health care workers tend to be drawn to urban centres, where health care services are better. In addition, the generally small budgets of mountain municipalities are strained by higher health care costs of an aging population. In the cases we examined, health care service providers and civic actors have initiated a range of innovative solutions to tackle the challenge of providing health care services in their area. In some cases, the public sector has played a supportive role. All of the solutions involve novel forms of cooperation between actors, most of whom have never worked together before nor been involved in health care. As such, these solutions represent social innovations.

Four examples from the Bernese Oberland in Switzerland are particularly relevant for addressing the widening gap in health care service provision:

- The Frutigland Rescue Service Foundation (*Stiftung Rettungsdienst Frutigland*) supports the ambulance service of the regional hospital by funding and helping to train paramedics. The funding is organized through charitable donations to a foundation and covers personnel costs as well as some of the infrastructure. It was established by engaged citizens in 2000 following the closure of the ambulance service, which for financial reasons was merged with more centrally located ambulance services.
- The second social innovation is a GP emergency centre in the Thun area (*Hausarztnotfall Region Thun*), founded in 2010 by a group of GPs from the Bernese



Bernese Oberland

The Bernese Oberland lies in the southern part of the Canton of Bern, between 500 and 4200 m asl and just north of the Swiss Alps. More than 200000 people live in more than 70 municipalities in an area of about 2900 km². Its main industry is tourism, attracting over 2 million visitors per year; it also has a strong construction industry.



Small communities in mountain regions face demographic changes and challenges in health care provision (H. Mayer)

Oberland. The emergency centre helps to coordinate the periods in which the GPs are legally required to provide emergency assistance, helping to decrease their workload and thus making this type of work more attractive.

- In 2015, the regional hospital in the municipality of Zweisimmen closed its maternity ward, mainly to save costs. Shortly after the closure, nearly 50 local citizens took action to fill this gap and in January 2017, the *Geburtshaus Maternité Alpine* was opened. This privately-operated birthing facility is organized as a cooperative, which encompasses more than 300 members. It is financed by the members, donations and the revenues from birth services it provides.
- A more general approach is taken by the *Integriertes Gesundheitsnetzwerk Simmental–Saanenland*, an “integrated health network” for two adjoining valleys of the Bernese Oberland. Founded in 2018, its purpose is to secure health care provision in the Simmental and Saanenland valleys by setting up a network among relevant actors, widening the range of services at the regional hospital and establishing a new health care centre. A broad set of actors such as the regional hospital operator, the cantonal director of public health and local mayors are involved in developing the network.

These novel forms of cooperation led to solutions that had never before been implemented in the Bernese Oberland. As they tackle the same challenge, they generate value for the region as a whole, not just for the actors involved. This value manifests itself economically and socially, contributing to regional development. The availability of local health care services and infrastructure reduces travel time for residents needing a service, as well as for skilled personnel required in the case of emergency. This helps the region to retain its attractiveness to existing residents, newcomers and health care personnel. To achieve sustainable regional development, it is vital that policy-makers consider social innovations. It is nonetheless important to remember that social innovations in health care in mountain regions, while highly useful, do not replace or substitute a certain level of general health care services. The public sector is still very much needed; in our examples, government actors play an important role in supporting the innovations.

Social innovations in the Bernese Oberland

A social innovation consists of new forms of cooperation at individual or organizational level that lead to new ideas, the implementation of which is at least considered. In the context of regional development, such innovations can have a positive impact on society, improve the quality of life and/or change social or power relations [1]. We found that the 68 social innovations we identified in the Bernese Oberland involved many sectors, ranging from health care to tourism and agriculture. Details are provided in our publicly accessible inventory [2].

- In the case of the Bernese Oberland, the enabling factors to successfully implement the social innovations included an openness to work together and willingness to find suitable organizational ways to secure a minimum standard of health care supply.
- Social innovations are an effective means of addressing critical shortages in health care supply. They comprise novel forms of cooperation and bring together various actors from the public, private, non-profit and civic sectors. They have the potential to create place-specific solutions to shortages in health care supply.
- Social innovations can contribute to sustainable regional development by focusing on positive outcomes for mountain regions. They should be seen as ways to incorporate various interests and capabilities, but not as substitutes or an excuse for the public sector to withdraw from peripheral regions.



Public meeting to inform the local population about the Integrated Health Network of Simmental–Saanenland, October 2019 (N. Sager)

“Trust has been built within the region. The pressure on all actors is high. The project can only succeed if everyone stands together.”

Pierre-Alain Schnegg, Government Councillor of the Directorate of Health, Social Affairs and Integration of the Canton of Bern, presenting the Integrated Health Network of Simmental–Saanenland during a public meeting [3].

Authors

Pascal Tschumi
Institute of Geography and Center for Regional Economic Development,
University of Bern, Switzerland
pascal.tschumi@giub.unibe.ch

Heike Mayer
Institute of Geography and Center for Regional Economic Development,
University of Bern, Switzerland
heike.mayer@giub.unibe.ch

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Note: URLs were last checked on 23 September 2020.

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