Partnering for Change: Link Research to Societal Challenges
Video Transcript

Coping with decline in a Swiss mountain village

[Caroline Näther] Andermatt is a small village in the heart of the Swiss Alps. It is located in the Urseren Valley. The place looks back on an eventful history that was shaped by both tourism and military. Localised in a peripheral region, tourism gained momentum in the 19th century. Until 1830, the surrounding mountain passes were made drivable.

Andermatt became a tourist destination. In 1882, the Gotthard railway connection opened. As it did not serve Andermatt, tourism took a blow. Nevertheless, the tourism industry provided labour and the basis of existence. The Gotthard region links Switzerland's German-speaking part with its Italian-speaking part.

The region was politically and geo-strategically important, thus of interest to the Swiss army. Benefiting from Gotthard tunnel connection, it established a training area at Andermatt. Starting with the Second World War, the Swiss army became the main employer in the village. At the same time, the tourism industry decreased further, becoming very small.

When the Cold War ended in 1991, the threat situation in Europe changed. The Swiss army began to withdraw from the Gotthard region. Andermatt lost its principal employer. The situation of its workforce became uncertain. As an effect, the number of inhabitants decreased. Locals as well as political authorities began to discuss how to deal with the situation. How could the potential be used? What new development would be possible?

Thanks to relations on the level of national government, the Egyptian investor Samih Sawiris was asked for advice. Sawiris, owning several resorts in Egypt and Europe, proposed to construct a luxury vacation place on the land formerly used by the military. National and cantonal governments were very pleased with this new perspective.

Samih Sawiris founded the company Andermatt Swiss Alps, short, ASA, and drafted plans for a new resort. The plans divided Andermatt's community. Some think the resort to be too large. Others see it as the only way for economic development. In a poll, the inhabitants then voted overwhelmingly for the project.

The resort was constructed. Andermatt underwent changes necessary to become a professional tourism destination. The local population had to cope with this transformation, including the prospect of a new type

of guest. The impact of such a process on the locals is difficult to predict. What are the consequences associated with a number of fake challenges, opportunities, and risks?

Tourism is often considered as a mostly economic phenomenon. To develop a tourist product then means to ensure economic success and to satisfy guests' needs. This approach disregards easily that tourist projects impact the local community. It is advisable to recognise and manage this socio-cultural impact.

Locals perceive their place not as a tourist product. It is a habitat in which people work and live. As residents, they play an important part in a tourist's experience. Thus, the tourism industry benefits if it considers life quality of the local community. This means that if we want to address change in the long term, we need to find solutions that respect local needs.

Thus, the study 'BESTandermatt' focuses on the social dimension of the resort's sustainable development. With a long-term structure, it allows inhabitants to assess the situation and their concern during each phase of the resort's implementation. It aims at creating conditions that allow local actors to participate in reflection and learning processes.

How can we best describe the social-cultural impact of the tourism resort on the inhabitants of Andermatt? We will address this question in the next episodes of this case study. You will explore the preliminary results of the study and how the population perceived the resort's effects.

You will also investigate how the locals' concerns and proposals were communicated by the research team to the cantonal and municipal authorities, as well as to the company Andermatt Swiss Alps.