

Alentejo in search of a sustainable future

As part of AEIDL's 30th anniversary celebrations, a field trip was organised in early October to Alentejo, a region of Southern Portugal that has undergone some rapid and drastic changes in recent years. The project visits and the seminar which followed were the opportunity for AEIDL participants to discover the region, the challenges it is currently facing and some of the initiatives put in place to respond to them. The trip was also the opportunity to investigate the role AEIDL could play in the process.

Marianne Geater, AEIDL (with contributions from Aleksandra Kowalska, Jean-Luc Janot and the CARMEN association) (07/11/2019)



Monsaraz and the Alqueva lake. (photo: Experitour)

The reasons behind Alentejo's recent meteoric rise are three-fold. First there was the construction of the Alqueva dam some 20 years ago which changed the face of Alentejo's agricultural scene. Water was suddenly abundant and cheap for large areas of land which in turn made intensive agriculture possible in a region with a long tradition of extensive agriculture and a low population density (less than 20 inhabitants/km²). Then in 2011 the government, as an incentive for investment in the newly viable agricultural region, provided cheap loans for investors willing to spend €500,000 and create jobs. Multinationals from Spain, the US, China and beyond jumped on the opportunity. The arrival of European fruit growers, Spanish olive oil makers, almond and berry farmers from California and Chile has led to a 50 percent price soar for irrigated land in the past 5 years and vast numbers of immigrants from Asia and Eastern Europe arriving in Alentejo to fill the labour shortage. Meanwhile, eco-tourism with its focus on culture and hiking has boomed in recent years, particularly on the coast, thanks to the creation of a natural park and the walking trails of [Rota Vicentina](#), doubling the numbers of tourists visiting Alentejo in the last decade.



Jean-Paul Brigand explaining some of his botanical research to the AEIDL team.

The programme for the Alentejo study trip was devised by Gilda Farrell, Samuel Thirion and Camilo Mortagua (local activists, and former LEADER experts), in cooperation with Jean-Luc Janot as coordinator.

Meetings with elected officials were held in [Alvito](#), [Ferreira do Alentejo](#) and [Alfundão](#), and visits were made to several local companies (Jean-Paul and Ann Kenny Brigand's [innovative botanical gardens](#), [Vitacress](#), an international horticultural company, and the Rota Vicentina tourist association), but three projects in particular made a lasting impression on the AEIDL team.



Sergio Maraschin (Transição São Luís) being interviewed by Marianne Geater and filmed by Fabrice Wagner.

São Luís, a village in transition

Carmen and Sergio Maraschin moved to São Luís in 2009 and brought the idea of the “[Totnes Transition Town](#)” model with them. As Sergio explained, the [Transição São Luís](#) initiative is an informal group of volunteer citizens whose purpose is to find creative solutions to the present and future challenges facing São Luís.

The association, which initially started as a small group made up essentially of women, has grown steadily over the years and has had a positive impact on the region. It has, for example, solved the quality problem of the village's water supply and has raised sufficient funds to install solar panels on public buildings with the aim of turning São Luís into “a renewable energy community”.

For Sergio, the starting point for a successful transition is to “change ourselves and our belief systems. If we want to change the world we need to start with ourselves otherwise everything will remain the same. The Green New Deal everyone talks about will simply be green capitalism and we will just end up in a bigger but greener mess”.

This approach has attracted a lot of attention and São Luís has seen its population increase dramatically since the transition initiative was launched. Young people who left to seek employment in bigger cities are coming back along with foreigners, executives and young retirees looking for a more meaningful lifestyle. As Sergio explains, three years ago there were eight children in the kindergarten now there are 20. Transição São Luís aims to bring everyone together around the transition project and avoid a cleavage between the locals and the newcomers.

“Our approach is that we need to solve our problems with our local resources using our creativity and imagination. We get together, we talk, there is a build-up of confidence between people and we achieve great things. Our purpose is not to boost the local economy but to reach self-sufficiency with a better quality of life and a more sustainable lifestyle”.

For the transition movement the term “development” is “a terrible word with connotations of colonialism and imperialism”. For Sergio development implies economic growth when “what we really need is a vision of qualitative changes to our way of life and not growth per se. Economic growth as we interpret it now is the wrong path. We have to go for positive changes that involve quality and an awareness of the impact of our actions on the population, health and the environment.”

Transição São Luís is now looking at ways to improve the school system and the medical services in town.



The community kitchen of Tamera's solar village.

Tamera - a blueprint for a possible post-capitalist society

Tamera is one of the largest and oldest ecovillages in Europe. In just over twenty years the [Tamera community](#) has used permaculture to completely transform the 200 hectare space it bought in 1995. Several small lakes were created and work was carried out to improve rain water infiltration in the soil.

The community intelligently combined plant species and created areas of shade and freshness to produce a multitude of vegetables and fruits. It is now self-sufficient in water. All year round, using both solar panels and the natural gas emitted by its compost, Tamera is close to becoming self-sufficient in energy for its 200 residents and for the 300 to 400 visitors they welcome during events. Studies on energy are being conducted at the solar village, an experimental place where a group of 50 people aim to live solely off solar and biomass energy.

“Tamera is about learning to live more sustainably. Most of the founders came from big cities to develop a model where people can live off renewable energy, decentralised water management and become self-sufficient in food production. We believe in regional resilience where we produce food but also support the local farmers and exchange products and services with them. The idea is not to be an island but to support and empower the whole region to develop sustainably,” explained Fatima Texeira, a Portuguese resident of Tamera, employed to make the link between Tamera and the local community.

Like Sergio Maraschin in São Luís, Fatima argues that Tamera is not about growing. “Anything that grows indefinitely is a cancer. What we do in Tamera is develop models that work and can be replicated elsewhere.”

Tamera has set up a global campus project working with partners from countries like Kenya, Israel, Mexico, Colombia and Brazil to empower communities and help them grow sustainably in the aspects of their choice.

Tamera is also about building a peace community and supporting a global system change. While the ideas promoted in Tamera might not be fully accepted by all the locals many, including municipalities and conventional businesses, recognise the merits of Tamera's water management system (called “water landscape”) and are now seeking to emulate it.

Vale de Santiago – keeping village life alive

‘Escola da vida’ (School of Life) is a project dreamt up by Cristina, a Lisbon psychologist, who three years ago decided to change her life and move from the city to the village. Within three months of arriving in Vale de Santiago, Cristina realised that many women in the village were widows, had nothing to do and stayed at home alone all day. She decided she wanted to “recreate a true sense of community where people come together and do things together”.



Cristina (centre) and some of the ladies of Escola da vida.

“We need to educate our kids to live in a community. The important aspect of this project is that what is happening here happens everywhere. Once people are old and no longer productive, they are simply put aside despite the fact they have still so much to offer younger generations.” Cristina therefore got the municipality to reopen the school (closed because of the lack of children) to these women so they could come to knit, weave, chat and lunch together. Once a week they also cook for the whole village. There are now plans to create a community garden.

Escola da vida was initially a one-woman project with no funding whatsoever yet it is successfully helping a dozen women “grow old with dignity by living fully in the community” while also helping change mentalities.



Future of Alentejo seminar

The high point of the study visit was a one-day seminar on the changing trends and the future of Alentejo, organised by the [CARMEN association](#) and AEIDL. It brought together around 40 different local actors (representatives of regional and local authorities, project promoters, activists, citizens...) who truly care about the future of the region but seldom, if ever, get the chance to sit at the same table and discuss the challenges lying ahead.

The objective was to debate the options for the region which, everyone agrees, faces an uncertain and rather worrying future, despite the enormous opportunities that the building of large dams and the recent development of tourism have to offer.

Participants agreed that Alentejo, which covers 30 percent of Portugal, should no longer be a region which simply sits back and suffers the effects of decisions taken elsewhere. Local input is necessary. Regional actors should have a say in any new development and need to take an active role in designing the best scenario for the future.

Many phenomena resulting from globalisation have emerged in Alentejo without anyone being prepared for them, including investments in intensive irrigated agriculture, new waves of migration and, soon, the large-scale expansion of the port of Sines with Chinese investments.

Faced with the dangers of these investments, particularly in terms of pollution, massive water consumption and a total disregard for the risks inherent to climate change and the need for energy transition, Alentejo needs a viable alternative so that quality of life is ensured for all in a sustainable manner.

This requires, in particular, solutions that consume little water, increase the autonomy of local populations in terms of food and energy and ensures a well-managed reception of migrants and refugees in this sparsely populated region.

There were some tense debates during the seminar as the opinions differed between participants but it was also apparent that all those present are keen to ensure a sustainable future for Alentejo. The notions of quality of life, encouraging organic farming (through the development of a “bioregion”), better water management and migrant integration emerged as strong common points during the seminar.

For the CARMEN association the event was the starting point for a process of consultation and co-creation on the future of this region involving local actors but also AEIDL. The idea is to keep the momentum and to put forward a plan for the reconversion of the region that limits intensive irrigated

agriculture and transforms the Sines¹ petrochemical pole into a more environmentally-friendly industrial centre.

For Samuel Thirion, “all the actors have complementary skills and by bringing these skills together it will be possible to draw a concrete vision for a sustainable future”. The time is right, he added, because of the environmental urgency and the growing public awareness of the need to act.

For Gilda Farrell, the priority is to attract young people to the region by offering them “an interesting alternative economy” and ideas to promote what is specific to the region. “Italy came up with the idea of slow food. Alentejo should follow this example and come up with solutions adapted to the region. There is no future for greenhouses here”.

The role of AEIDL

For AEIDL as a Brussels-based association fully familiar with the workings of the EU institutions, there is scope to be part of the process by playing an interface role with the EU programmes and support. AEIDL has always recognised the importance of strengthening the bottom-up and not just the top-down dimension of European policies and a close collaboration with CARMEN could be the opportunity to do just that.

Christine Kotarakos Poncelet, Head of Business Development at AEIDL, pointed out that little was said during the seminar on how to develop initiatives aimed at bringing young people back to the region. This is one area where AEIDL could contribute but there are many others as AEIDL has accumulated knowledge on a wide variety of policies and topics over the years. A Working Group will be set up in the weeks to come to explore more concrete collaboration in future.



Alqueva dam.

¹ Sines is home to one of the largest refineries in Europe with an annual processing capacity of 10.8million tons. It is also one of the major European ports and the great hub port of the Iberian-Atlantic front. Earlier this year it was announced that €547 million of private Chinese investment money would go towards expanding the port.