

What future for changing Alentejo?

Seminar held at the CARMEN Centre on 5/10/2019 – Report of the seminar and perspectives for the future

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On 5 October 2019, a seminar on the theme, ‘What future for changing Alentejo?’ was held at the CARMEN Centre¹, attracting 35 participants from various backgrounds. The debates highlighted the need to build a shared vision of what a sustainable future should look like for this region. Such an approach would avoid the major ongoing transformations produced by globalisation having disastrous consequences.

General presentation of the seminar and its proceedings

A vast, mainly rural region with a low population density and a strong cultural identity, Alentejo is currently undergoing a major transformation. Marked by centuries of an extensive agro-pastoral system and forestry activities, against a backdrop of class struggle between landowners and agricultural workers, the region is today subject to three factors that are radically changing its socio-economic, demographic and cultural characteristics:

- The extension of irrigated areas through the construction of dams initiated in the 1950s and 1960s, which gradually spread to almost the entire region, mainly via the exploitation of the Alqueiva dam and the networking of nearly all the dams. Given that Alentejo is one of the few regions with a Mediterranean climate that still has water, it has become highly

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attractive for investors in intensive almond, olive and fruit cultivation, which is transforming the region's physical and social landscape.

- The development of tourism, particularly on the coast, with major investments in infrastructure and the development of services.
- The demographic evolution of the region, marked by the mass departure of especially young people from the 1980s onwards, as a result of the failure of agrarian reform and then the use of foreign labour for intensive agricultural holdings in irrigated areas. In addition, the installation of neo-rurals is an essential factor for economic diversification and rural innovation.

Given these factors, what does Alentejo's future look like? What new configuration is emerging in the context of the globalisation of the economy? What are the environmental, social, economic and cultural challenges for the future?

To discuss these issues, the associations CARMEN and AEIDL organised a seminar on 5 October 2019 for reflection and exchange among people with diverse range of experiences and expertise. A total 108 invitations were sent with 47 people registering and 36 actually taking part.

This seminar followed [three days of field visits in Alentejo](#), allowing initial exchanges with local elected officials, entrepreneurs, project promoters and community activists.

Debates during the seminar were organised around four themes, each of which was the subject of a session:

Session 1: Transformation of physical landscapes and agricultural production systems

Session 2: Transformation of human landscapes

Session 3: Transformation of the local economy

Session 4: Transformation of the environment

Each session was introduced by two brief interventions, followed by an open exchange. The following are the main conclusions and perspectives after the seminar.

Main conclusions

Context

Traditionally, and since the departure of the Arabs and the loss of their agricultural techniques almost eight centuries ago, Alentejo has been a sparsely populated region with very large properties, known as *latifundia*, oscillating between cereal growing and extensive sylvopastoral systems, depending on price trends and soil quality. As a result, the latifundary system was based on a wage system negotiated daily in the village square, with no fixed social link between workers and latifundaries, with the exception of managers (*feitores*) and shepherds. It was supplemented by seasonal contracts with precarious sharecroppers (*seareiros*) to ensure the more or less occasional cereal crops necessary for the rotational maintenance of pastures.

In this context, Alentejo is a region deeply marked by a culture of class struggle between the majority agricultural day labourers, who had to move to find work according to harvests, and landowners living mainly in the towns. This clash can be found in songs (*canto alentejano*) and in the social movements that shook the region, especially in the 20th Century: uprisings and strikes in 1910, 1918, 1962 and more recently the land occupation movement in 1975. The latter revealed a particular feature of this ancestral culture, that of a deep and general aspiration to the collective organisation of production in cooperative form, especially among the precarious sharecroppers who have been one of the pillars of this movement. Forty-five years later, the

massive exodus – particularly of young people, following, among other things, land restitution and the effects of globalisation – have erased traces of this movement, at least in appearance.

In addition, the introduction and gradual spread of irrigated agriculture through the retention of rainwater, with the construction of large dams from the 1950s onwards, have brought about major changes in economic, social, cultural and ecological terms. Economically, the income per hectare of irrigated agriculture is on average 10 times higher than that of drylands, leading to an explosion in the price of land. On a social level, the development of fixed or seasonal employment contracts required for irrigated crops and the use of mass immigration to compensate for rural exodus have led to a radical change in social relations and demographics. In the interior areas, many mayors (presidents of *juntas de freguesia* or *concelhos*) see that these new perspectives offer a lifeline to territories that were being completely desertified. In coastal areas, the development of tourism and the extension of the Sines industrial centre have also been factors of economic and social transformation, which are appreciated by elected officials concerned about employment and the consolidation of the local socio-economic fabric.

Despite these new economic opportunities, Alentejo faces an uncertain and very worrying future. Many phenomena produced by globalisation have appeared without anyone being prepared for them, such as investments in large-scale intensive irrigated agriculture (olive trees, almond trees, table grapes, etc.), new waves of migration and the coming expansion of the port of Sines through Chinese investment. Moreover, these impacts are being felt on an increasing scale in the wider international context, with Alentejo becoming one of the only Mediterranean regions where there is still water, and attracting foreign investors from countries where water is no longer available, such as Spain and California.

How can the negative effects of large-scale intensive agriculture, as already seen in these countries, be avoided, particularly in terms of environmental conservation and long-term water management? How to solve the problem of the industrial pole of Sines, which is still almost entirely based on the exploitation of fossil fuels (oil and coal) at a time when sustainable development objectives require their rapid abandonment? How can we deal with the problem of immigration in a reasoned and humane way, and not at the mercy of the financial interests of intermediaries with all the suffering that this entails?

In search of new paths for a sustainable future

These were some of the questions that the seminar participants asked themselves during the day. These questions are all the more relevant as negative impacts are already being felt. The water level of dams such as Santa Clara is at its lowest level in 10 years, at a time when domestic, agricultural and tourism demand is growing rapidly.

Many participants are developing innovative ways of acting that can open up solutions for the future. Jean-Paul Brigand points out that the problem is not the lack of water but its waste (50% of water is not used in the case of the Santa Clara dam). He and his partner Anne have been growing highly water-efficient fruit for 10 years using mulch minerals. Experiencing the introduction and preservation of a large number of varieties that were previously present or newly acclimatised, they were able to identify different productions that respond to specific market niches and can be produced on a small scale. Others, such as Andrea Presti, Alfredo Sendim and many newcomers, are developing forms of agroecology (permaculture, agroforestry, organic farming, biodynamics, etc.) which, in addition to saving water, ensure the protection of the environment and biodiversity. Others, such as *Cabazes da Horta* (boxes of farm goods) and the new CSA system², have set up forms of direct sales and solidarity between consumers and

² Community-Supported Agriculture: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Community-supported_agriculture

producers to ensure sufficient income for the latter, while preserving traditional agro-ecological systems, which are less productive but have no negative impact on the environment.

Outside the agricultural sector, participants shared their experiences, before and during the seminar, on numerous initiatives aimed at achieving a sustainable long-term economy and addressing the major challenges of climate change and ecological transition. For more than 10 years, the [São Luis Transition Group](#) has been seeking to raise collective awareness of the need for lifestyle change and for an oil-free economy in the village. The [Tamera ecovillage](#) has also provided an opportunity to pilot new initiative for easing this transition since the 1990s. The association of women of Vale de Santiago, led by Cristina Miranda, recreates a place of conviviality in a desertified area that is inhabited almost exclusively by the elderly. All these initiatives are part of the same desire to break out of the infernal circle of growth and create jobs, reintroducing a notion of living well together. They join a fundamental movement to which belong an increasing number of people, who were formerly integrated into the urban economy but have decided to leave their jobs to settle in Alentejo and rebuild a more balanced life in harmony with nature.

Other initiatives aim to address immediate challenges posed by the new transformations produced by globalisation, particularly with regard to migrants. The testimony of Ram Kande, a Nepalese agricultural worker in Odemira, provided a better understanding of the complexity of the difficulties migrants face in their journey from their country of origin to the region. He highlighted the individual nature of such journeys and their high exposure to various risks. For her part, Ana Paula Mareiras, representing Deolinda Seno Luis, Municipal Councillor of Odemira in charge of social and migratory issues, presented the range of problems linked to support for migrants, the resources set up by the municipality and the difficulties encountered. There is clearly a considerable gap between the rapid growth in the number of migrants and the real capacity to receive them, as José Alberto Guerreiro, Mayor of Odemira, also emphasised in an interview with the newspaper *O Público* on 13 November 2019³.

The need to act together

As debates progressed in the four successive seminar sessions, the reflection focused on finding effective solutions for the region's future. This led to some key questions being asked:

1 - How to move from a reactive attitude in the face of the immensity and complexity of problems to a more proactive and anticipatory attitude?

The responses given to the problems generated by the major transformations under way (availability of water in the medium term, various types of pollution, massive influx of migrants) are above all reactive: we must respond to the most urgent needs, without having the time or the means to create a global vision that can frame these transformations in a sustainable perspective in the long term. However, developing such a vision is vital for ensuring that Alentejo is no longer a region that suffers the effects of decisions taken elsewhere without local actors having a say and the opportunity to reflect and design what would be the best scenario of the future and how to create it.

Several key ideas were expressed in this regard during the seminar:

- Aim for rational and efficient water management throughout the chain: preservation, distribution and use. Regarding use, it is essential to promote agricultural production systems that consume as little water as possible by providing guidance and information on the most successful experiences and an incentive and adequate pricing system.

³ <https://www.publico.pt/2019/11/13/local/noticia/autarca-quer-reforco-servicos-publicos-odemira-devido-numero-imigrantes-1893656>

- Aim at forms of agricultural production that not only consume little water but also protect the environment and biodiversity, in particular by promoting the various forms of agroecology.
- Get out of the infernal circle of uncontrolled immigration of agricultural workers to promote reasoned and concerted immigration in the interest of all: migrants, families and countries of origin and host region. For example, migration could be a vehicle for concerted decentralised cooperation between origin and host territories, giving migrants the opportunity to become ambassadors for such cooperation. On this basis, the reception of migrants could then be organised in advance in the host communities.
- Develop a culture of living together by strengthening solidarity and local autonomy in each municipality/freguesia in terms of access to water, energy, food, housing and other basic resources, in a context where the “re-localisation” of the economy is becoming an increasingly important necessity. In this respect, the aspiration to forms of collective production found in the ancestral culture of Alentejo is undoubtedly an essential asset to be revalued.
- Promote youth interest in the region. In a context where young people are above all attracted by urban jobs and have their eyes fixed on smartphones and what globalisation offers them, resurrecting an interest for the territory, local action and a rapprochement with nature seems to be an almost impossible challenge. However, many young people, faced with precariousness or the loss of meaning in their jobs, come to settle in Alentejo in search of a more balanced life. This phenomenon should be systematically encouraged by facilitating the reception and integration of these newcomers into local communities.

2 - How to move from local, often isolated, initiatives to a more general movement?

Today, many initiatives are part of these perspectives but they remain isolated and have a limited capacity for dissemination in a general context that is not very favourable to them. It is essential to radically change this situation by giving local actions that best meet long-term challenges the status of pilot experiences, which are recognised and promoted as such, particularly by public institutions. They are far too focused on their own agendas with their own funding methods and beneficiaries. However, experience shows that the most innovative and forward-looking initiatives are often independent of European, national or local public funds. There is therefore a need for a repositioning of public support without limiting itself to financial support, in a win-win perspective for all: a win-win situation for public institutions by widening the circle of initiatives they support without the need for additional financial support; a win-win situation for initiatives that thus acquire legitimacy and recognition for their own dissemination. Moreover, it's a win for the territory, which thus really benefits from the results of pilot initiatives.

More generally, this raises the question of the means that are used to learn together and to learn to act together – to pool, capitalise and disseminate know-how. This is probably an essential point that is lacking when compared with the situation in other countries or regions that have their own research centres working in partnership with local actors and acting as catalysts for shared learning at regional level.

3 - How to reconcile re-localisation of the economy and industrial production?

Re-localising the economy and promoting greater autonomy for local populations to meet basic needs is now necessary and desirable in the face of the challenges of climate change and the necessary transition to a fossil fuel-free economy. Nevertheless, as Francisco Lampeira, President of the Junta de Freguesia de Vila Nova de Milfontes, pointed out: there will always be a need for an industrial and urban economy for goods, equipment and investments that cannot be produced on a small scale. He gave the example of the railway, which the region is currently lacking and should be a priority investment.

In this respect, Alentejo also faces a major industrial conversion problem in Sines. The planned closure of the thermoelectric power plant in 2022 is a first step in this direction. But, as Eugénia Santa-Barbara of the ALA association explained, a reconversion of the Sines industrial centre also implies the creation of new jobs in sectors of the sustainable, fossil fuel-free economy, which can only be done in consultation with the people involved and their respective organisations (trade unions, employers, municipalities, etc.).

What next?

In conclusion, the seminar highlighted the need for a comprehensive conversion plan for the Alentejo region, which would make it possible to provide a shared reference framework for current and future investments and to respond to the challenges posed by climate change and international agreements, in particular on reducing GHG emissions. One of the major challenges is to build adequate responses to what Sergio Maraschin called the two elephants: intensive agriculture and the industrial pole and port of Sines. This is why such a plan should integrate the development of sustainable agriculture with low water consumption, local development and industrial conversion, to be developed in consultation with the different types of stakeholders at different levels.

The seminar participants highlighted the notions of quality of life and respect for nature as the main thrust of such a plan. Alfredo Sendim proposed the idea of a 'bioregion', a concept that would integrate these two dimensions. Such a plan, even in draft form, would have the advantage of being a catalyst for dialogue and the construction of a shared vision, inviting all stakeholders to come together around a master idea of quality of life for all, to be ensured in a co-responsible way.

In this perspective, a consensus emerged at the end of the seminar to follow up on, with a view to starting to lay the foundations for such a conversion plan. Several thematic seminars could be organised to clarify the outlines.

The challenge is certainly not simple because it is a question of promoting a dialogue between actors who do not necessarily speak to each other, or may even have divergent interests in the short term, but who have essential complementary skills. Many participants expressed interest in participating in this process in one way or another.

Helder Guerreiro, a member of the Alentejo CCDR Managing Authority⁴, expressed the openness and interest that the CCDR could have in bringing together stakeholders from the territory to contribute to a debate on the Region's Development Plans. This could be done, for example, by introducing innovations which are appropriate to maintaining the population, especially young people, and adapting crops and services to new climatic conditions.

The [European Association for Information on Local Development \(AEIDL\)](#), based in Brussels, could also play an interface role with European bodies, particularly with a view to developing another relationship between public entities and civil society, recognising promising initiatives as pilots, even when they do not receive public funding. In other words, it would be a question of promoting a bottom-up and not just a top-down approach in these relationships. Exchanges took place between the AEIDL and CARMEN associations in this direction for the follow-up of the seminar.

[Original article in FR](#)

[Article in PT](#)

[Report on AEIDL's Alentejo field trip](#)

⁴ CCDR (*Comissão de Coordenação e Desenvolvimento Regional*): Commission for Coordination and Regional Development (decentralised services of the State at regional level).