

Rural landscapes: Case study of Village Plans in Central Portugal ("Network of Schist Villages")

Paulo Carvalho*

Abstract

Recent years have borne witness to the growing reassessment of the importance of the rural world (where it is possible to rediscover new centralities, based on quality), and of the values of country life (and these, too, are changing) in terms of the equilibrium and cohesion of the world system. In (Western) Europe, each territory is drawing back the veil to reveal its specific potential, and trying to base new philosophies for the territorial development of rural regions on concepts such as multifunctionality, sustainability and subsidiarity (Carvalho, 2002).

This reappraisal of the rural does not disregard the core role of farming (in all its aspects: biological, environmental, ... and not simply in its productivist version). The farmer thus attains the status of an important player in the task of conserving the heritage and landscape features of the rural world. Farming, indeed, is seen as the heart of the multifunctionality which is intended for the rural areas of Europe. Without this, other functionalities, such as Tourism in the Countryside are not possible. In this logic, the rural landscape, which, as a result of its inclusion in the productivist system, has become rather monotonous (Dewailly, 1998), is (re)placed at the centre of aesthetic worries and in the lives of postmodern peoples, where it is increasingly found to be a factor in the quality of life, something to be preserved (Beaudet, 1999). The involvement of a people with a landscape occurs both with respect to the material elements, and in relation to the immaterial symbols of that landscape.

This article is not presented as a research paper with theory, hypothesis to be demonstrated, material and methods, results. It is a commentary on policy interventions on territories. The contents of this article could be interesting for the WS with more substance and trial to see the role and functions of the agriculture on the rural landscapes (past, present and future).

Rural landscapes as development resource

To ponder on the paths of development, which today are being forged in a more heterogeneous and complex social context, one which is less predictable and perhaps more demanding in the search for creative responses to new challenges, is also to ask how territories are organized and consumed, and what action should be taken in these geographic regions of everyday life.

Rural landscapes in the western world, with their fragilities and particular diffuse features are no longer experienced and regarded solely from the perspective of their productive potential. Thus, in a different context, they may become more complex, increasing their functional diversity and sustainability.

At the same time, the growing importance of the image and identity of the rural territories, and the strategic value of how they are planned and managed are exposed.

Heritage is today recognized as structural element of memory, image and territorial identity, and one of the essential resources for affirming cultural and environmental values against a renewed backdrop of

* Centre of Geographical Studies University of Coimbra, 3000- 447 Coimbra, Portugal (ohmega@clix.pt).

new theories on territorial development, specially in the spirit of territorialist theories, those that best respond to the greatest needs of society and participative citizenry.

But the productivist policies certainly left their imprint on contemporary rural Portugal, especially in more isolated regions, more marked by physical constraints and more remote. The cycles of emigration to Brazil and Europe at the end of the 19th and in the middle of the 20th century, respectively, both provide the context for and bear witness to these facts. At first sight, the *raison d'être* of this tide of emigration can be found in the historical, semi-peripheral position of Portugal relative to territories which have led the field in economic growth since the Industrial Revolution. There was a chronic reliance on the 'outside', which corresponded to this relative position. The Portuguese then entered into their demographic and epistemological transitions. But the demographic curve was not accompanied by an economic one. The Portuguese population responded to this difference with spatial mobility, to the outside world, and also to the coast, notably to the large metropolitan areas, particularly Lisbon. This city was increasingly taken as the geo-economic and political centre of Portugal. The interior became depopulated, thanks in part to policies such as the *Campanha do Trigo* (Wheat Campaign) and the *Florestação Estatal dos Baldios* (government sponsored afforestation of the mountain slopes). Another contributory factor was the failure of the procedures of the *Junta de Colonização Interna* (Internal Colonization Board), plus the impotence of the development centres established by the *Planos de Fomento* (Promotion Schemes), and the lack of any clear rural development policy. The ruralist theses of the *Estado Novo* were more often than not restricted to extolling the simple, healthy, traditional bucolic lifestyle of a submissive and poorly educated people.

Most of Portugal's rural local authorities, in a country where distances are still relatively large, and concentrated on the coast, have seen their populations decline and grow old, thus losing any benefits in terms of the location of human resources. Lack of functionality and desertion have left deep scars on the landscape of rural Portugal. An important part of the Portuguese identity has been lost, and a swathe of its heritage has been degraded: the forests, the *montes* (large, isolated estates in Alentejo), the hill villages of northern and central Portugal. Furthermore, the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) and the entry of Portugal into the European Union (1986) have also made their impression. In terms of farming, policies of short-term gain came to rule the day: "The CAP and the provision of funds led to an increase in investment, but in projects outside the context of Portugal's circumstances and which tend to segregate small farmers, who are the majority, and suffer most harm, which has led to the depopulation and increasing imbalance in the settlement system" (Firmino, 1999: 87).

Recent years have borne witness to the growing reassessment of the importance of the rural world (where it is possible to rediscover new centralities, based on quality), and of the values of country life (and these, too, are changing) in terms of the equilibrium and cohesion of the world system. In (Western) Europe, each territory is drawing back the veil to reveal its specific potential, and trying to base new philosophies for the territorial development of rural regions on concepts such as multifunctionality, sustainability and subsidiarity (Carvalho, 2001).

This reappraisal of the rural does not disregard the core role of farming (in all its aspects: biological, environmental, ... and not simply in its productivist version). The farmer thus attains the status of an important player in the task of conserving the heritage and landscape features of the rural world. Farming, indeed, is seen as the heart of the multifunctionality which is intended for the rural areas of Europe.

And so a commitment must be made to the valorization of both the cultural materials belonging to each place and its symbolic cultures, important to the affirmation of self-conception among local people (Reis, 1998). Regarding this, in a context of open competition, the affirmation of a territory or place is also achieved by constructing and disseminating an image of distinction and quality, focused to a

considerable extent on the identities and symbolic resources of each place (Janiskee and Drews, 1998). The issue of geographic scale is of no relevance here.

A territory should not be seen merely in the context of its ranking in the international productive system. There is a qualitative “leap” here, which is opening the prospect of a vertical and horizontal placing, in a network of cooperation and solidarity. Globalization, which has gained ground in the last few decades, is undoubtedly a factor of rationality, and diffusion of the neo-liberal model. Even so, factors like new information technologies are also opening up the possibilities of reaffirming participative citizenship and the individual identity of each place. Local development thus emerges as the process of linking the global to the local. An interdependent and pro-active liaison in those of the more tertiarized societies that are conscious of their responsibilities, of their rights and duties.

The new directions taken by European development policies have shown marked changes in the ways of thinking about, and taking action on regions: from an essentially productivist model, launched at the dawn of the 1960s and guided by simple economic criteria (increasing earnings, developing economies of scale, agricultural competitiveness, liberalising markets), to a post-productivist model that bestows on the rural world and its people a role that is more environmentalist, ecological and participative (Fernández, 2002). This last aspect requires a multifunctional agriculture: besides supplying farm produce, agriculture also yields public benefits (it cares for nature and the countryside, protects the environment and facilitates land use management), for which the taxpaying citizen has to pay.

The transition from a productivist and economist discourse to an environmental and territorial discourse also means that European rural areas, with their fragilities and individual diffuse properties, have ceased to be viewed and perceived exclusively from the standpoint of their productive potentialities, enabling them to achieve complexity, functional diversity and sustainability, in a quite different context (Carvalho, 2002).

In the case of peripheral rural areas, the dynamics of recent years has generally intensified the processes of desertion and degradation of buildings and rural landscapes. But some of these regions are now organised and possessed, particularly by town dwellers who value the cultural and landscape elements formerly regarded as a sign of archaism, in a genesis of spontaneous processes or public initiatives, the aim of which is to restore these regions and boost their potentialities. The heritage and landscape value is almost always linked to such actions, and it functions as an anchor for projects and initiatives, with one of the main development options being rural tourism (Carrasco, 1998).

And so heritage is today identified as an important resource for rural development, which is why the components of a region are key elements for the tourist valuation of a locality.

Landscape itself is thus interpreted as a tourist asset, in the sense that it can represent a useful development tool, something to be prized and preserved for rural tourism (Carvalho, 2003).

“Landscapes express both the uniqueness and the identity of each locality (*geniu loci*), reflecting the natural history just as much as the cultural history of a region, at a given time. They are dynamic by nature and are constantly changing, but they are also unique to each place” (Pinto-Correia, 2001: 198).

The interaction between the natural system and the social system lends a landscape a territorial dimension, in which the way the landscape is appropriated by communities varies as much through the natural system as with the values of the society that is influencing it (Pinto-Correia, *op. cit.*; Leimgruber, 2002).

According to Unesco, cultural landscapes represent the combined work of nature and man, and this body also acknowledges the enormous variety of such interactive manifestations.

The text of the Convention concerning the Protection of World Heritage (Unesco, 1972; 1983) describes cultural landscapes as ones which have evolved organically. Nowadays these landscapes can be a relic (or fossil) of the past, or they can even have an active social role, associated with an evolving traditional way of life.

In the European Landscape Convention (Council of Europe, 2000), signatory countries pledged to regard landscapes as fundamental factors of European identity, incorporating this into their natural and cultural heritage.

It starts from the statement that landscapes are going through an accelerated process of transformation, in a variety of directions, which justifies the need for intervention (defining landscape policies, and including landscapes in sectoral policies).

In the case of cultural landscapes in the rural matrix, what is actually at stake may be summarised in the following questions: How can they be kept functional? How can they be made to evolve harmoniously? As whom? And for whom?

It matters, therefore, that we understand the structuring language, that is, the events and values, and the way in which they are manifested in society-territory bonds, overcoming a phase characterised by a degree of illiteracy (inability or indifference to reading and interpreting landscapes).

This is the context that accommodates the "Program of Schist Villages" in Central Portugal (which arose from the creation of the "Network of Schist Villages" - *Rede de Aldeias do Xisto*), under the "Operational Plan for the Central Region of Portugal" (an instrument for structuring development in the region for the period 2000-2006, backed by funding from the European Union – "Community Support Framework III").

This initiative involves over twenty hill villages (peripheral micro-territories), distributed among thirteen municipalities in the sub-regions of Pinhal Interior, North and South, Beira Interior South and Cova da Beira (Figure 1).

It concerns the "rehabilitation of a group of hill villages (repairing roofs and façades, upgrading social areas, installing urban furniture, repairing road surfaces and footpaths, putting in basic infrastructure systems) to support a network of sites of tourist interest" (CCRC, 2001: 38).

These localities are now integrated into a system in accordance with a (tourist) development scheme, involving the region as a whole, which also embraces the scenic roads that link the villages, and envisages, further, panoramic routes, recreation parks and stopping places with charts describing the landscape, belvederes.

Based on the "Village Plans", a feature of territorial administration that is concerned with micro-territories (peripheral, and exhibiting economic, social and demographic fragilities), the aim is to consolidate and motivate proposals for intervention (with financial support from the European Union and the Portuguese Government), which aim to requalify such regions, improve the life of the people, heighten their self-esteem and foster their potentialities (original and special).



Figure 1. The “Network of Schist Villages” (Central Portugal): a municipal view

The drafting of “Village Plans”, on the initiative of the municipalities involved, and following defined criteria, related to a clutch of concerns, which are also methodological steps that can be summarised as follows:

- Characterization of the intervention area, by constructing a narrative of the geo-historical evolution of the regions, including their demographic, social and economic components. The structure built up for each village according to its chief structuring components, from both the urbanistic viewpoint (such as the analysis of the urban morphology and structure), and the architectural viewpoint (for instance, the state of preservation of property, type of roofs and eaves, the outside of the building).
- Diagnosing needs, a stage of the plan depicted at various levels: private property, public facilities, public spaces, population, infrastructures, economic activities, are among the most important; interviews and socio-economic surveys conducted on the local residents are essential here.
- Proposal for intervention, which defines the actions to be carried out and the spaces or components of the village that are to be the subject of intervention. As an example we might mention private buildings (façades and roofs, sheds and storehouses), public buildings (rehabilitation of squares and streets; improving/installing basic infrastructures; urban furniture).

- Finally, the Execution Plan, where the different intervention typologies are budgeted (according to defined parameters) and related to the time envisaged for the intervention (execution programme) and with the economic resources available (financing plan).

This paper will also give a systematized indication of the territorial asymmetries, the problems and the potentialities of the schist villages.

- Differentiating the administrative designations for the localities: small villages, small towns formerly municipal seats (extinguished in the 19th century), which are now parish seats, also correspond to distinct demographic, economic and social cadres. The demographic dimension of the localities in the network, for example, oscillates between two residents and more than one hundred residents. This means that local levels of abandonment are differentiated.
- The structure in terms of buildings is also highly variable: number of properties; state of preservation; typology and architectural characteristics; occupation typology (permanent home, seasonal home, and mixed situations).
- The basic infrastructure systems (water, electricity, drains, rubbish collection) also show territorial asymmetries; but one negative situation they have in common is the absence of public wastewater treatment plants.
- The total investment approved by the CCRC (Central Region Co-ordination Commission) is 10 million euros (53% of the total investment submitted by the municipalities), in accordance with the structural components (private property, public property, public spaces, infrastructures) also reflects the differences highlighted earlier.
- But, the most interesting image of some of these Network villages arises from the enduring outlines of local architecture (with its traditional construction features and the materials used) and from the tightly packed houses with their rough, winding paths (worked from the bare rock), flanked by dry-stone walls, which lead to tiny plots of farmland (Figure 2). These too need the help of stone walls to prevent the land from collapsing and being carried away to the bottom of the valley; the scene is rounded off by what remains of the old deciduous woodland, consisting of sweet chestnuts (*Castanea sativa*), oak (*Quercus pirenayca*; *Quercus robur*) and some species on the water's edge.

In such cases, are we not looking at examples of cultural landscapes? It should be recalled that "Cultural landscapes are collective works, the fruit of specific social organizations. They occasionally represent an optimum state of utilization of endogenous resources. Offering important goods and services to a society as a consequence of their aesthetic quality, cultural richness, capacity to regulate the hydrological and nutrient cycles, their heterogeneity and biological diversity. The landscape is also a language, a perception and a common aspiration in society" (Conclusions and Resolutions of the "I Colóquio Ibérico de Ecologia da Paisagem", 2001).

In addition, the above document also says that "The Iberian Peninsula is home to some of the finest functional cultural landscapes that remain in Europe. Abandonment and rural depopulation are the biggest threat. There is today a strong reason to worry about the loss of heritage resulting from the disappearance of these landscapes".



Figure 2. The village of Candal (Lousã Mountain, Central Portugal)

- The protection status of these cultural landscapes is differentiated, too. At local level, the municipal land use management plans of the municipalities involved in the network reveal very distinct concerns: from defining more or less wider urban perimeters (which means the technical and political intention of allowing more building in the localities, as happens particularly in the older towns and in the larger and better characterized villages), to designing the urban area limited to the consolidated space of the village (in this case the goal is not to allow new building, but rather to rebuild properties that are in a poor state of repair or in ruins, and so provide properties with areas (sq. m.) more in keeping with the needs of the new, essentially neo-rural, users (of urban origin), in the context of second homes. At national and international level, the proposals and procedures for classification as cultural heritage submitted for consideration by the competent national authorities have to be borne in mind, and the results of the national *Rede Natura 2000* sites.
- The drafting (technical responsibility) of the plans is undertaken by various bodies: multidisciplinary teams established for the purpose (Local Technical Offices - GTL, created for a period of two years); outside firms hired by the municipalities, generally with experience in the area of land use planning and urbanism, and, in some cases, it has been the responsibility of the Technical Support Offices (co-funded by groups of municipalities).
- The application of the plans, once approved by the CCRC, is, in some cases, done by bodies that have had no hand at all in drafting them, as in the case of the Lousã GTL, responsible for executing the plans of the hill villages (seven) in the municipality of Lousã. Would it not be legitimate here to question the options in relation to suiting the actions planned (and the financial resources provided in the meantime) to the philosophy of the new team that is going to execute them on the ground? Pursuit of this goal includes the need to sound out the people, who are, after all, the main co-actors in the construction of the hill regions. In other words, we are looking at a process that has to be flexible, and so it should be in a constant state of adjustment and assessment.
- However, these villages should not remain isolated from a network which is territorially very broad. Today it does not make sense, in terms of tourism, to invest according to isolationist principles!

Within the framework of cultural tourism, but also within other spheres of tourism and cultural activities, there is a tendency to integrate places into networks/itineraries, in which the different territorial components act as a federation. This is the strategy defined by the CCRC for the Pinhal Interior ("Pine Forests of the Interior"), as well as its own work on the *Rede de Aldeias do Xisto*.

By thinking in terms of this type of integrated development, in which various features interconnect and complement each other, we are providing the interior with a powerful tourist attraction.

Final Remarks

The issue of territorial development and local populations has achieved considerable visibility in recent years, on several levels: conceptual plan; documents and texts with strategic guidelines, as a result of the attitude adopted by various national and international organizations; policies and actions on different scales; and the more or less active and clear participation of the diverse actors.

We are interested in the process of territorial transformation and the "construction" of a society that is closer to eco-development, in which the quality of people's life arises from harmony with nature, without significant economic, social, environmental and spatial imbalances, in other words, a society where development is more sustainable, in which there are fewer inequalities and more harmony with the space (Rodríguez, 2003). Because of this, and since today we are looking for "new territories for new societies", the interpretative analysis of the countryside, with input from several scientific areas, should be useful when it comes to developing future policies that focus on the key points of the imbalances between regions and the possible ways of correcting development orientations and policies.

Just as regions vary geographically, their affirmation is also achieved by building up and disseminating an image of distinction and quality, centred on their identities (in a state of perpetual construction) and on their resources (material and immaterial); the knowledge (gained by reading and interpretation) of landscapes is inseparable from the perception of their "genetic code" as a matrix of potential geographical relevance.

The landscape as cultural construct, from the standpoint of understanding its structuring languages, is now also assuming aspects of a privileged framework for conceptual reflection, within the theme of development.

Similarly, it is once again being placed at the centre of the aesthetic and experiential concerns of post-modern populations, and is the kernel of a very significant series of recommendations, conventions, doctrines, instruments and strategic guidelines that span different spatial scales (from the global to the local), and touch on sundry levels of scientific knowledge (Carvalho and Fernandes, 2002).

European rural spaces, with their fragilities and respective diffuse characteristics, are no longer exclusively felt and viewed from the standpoint of their productive potentialities. Furthermore, in a different context, they may be gaining in complexity, functional diversity and sustainability.

Rural landscapes reflect the living evidence of their history and rural culture; they are repositories of heritage (both natural and cultural), indispensable for the new lifestyles in rural regions. Post-modern societies likewise see these values as a substantial part of their heritage (Riva, 2002).

One of the biggest challenges currently facing us is how to maintain and cherish rural landscapes; this will require stimulation and support for the rediscovery and reinvention of the rural (and new ways of experiencing rurality), with dignity, and quality of life.

In this context of change, in which the (re)discovery of the countryside and of its heritage value are today fundamental conditions for constructing new identities, and for identifying development alternatives, it accommodates the “Program for Schist Villages” Based on the “Village Plans”, a feature of territorial administration that is concerned with micro-territories (peripheral, and exhibiting economic, social and demographic fragilities), the aim is to consolidate and motivate proposals for intervention (with financial support from the European Union and the Portuguese Government).

It is an integrating approach, sustained by a series of actions that have been designed to rehabilitate rural areas that are in decline, to improve the living conditions of the local residents, to raise their self-esteem and foster their original, exceptional, potentialities. It is also intended to stimulate their inclusion as authentic cultural tourism destinations.

The future Network, which covers over two dozen hill villages (Portuguese Central Mountain Range), shows the heterogeneity of its structural components and the different actors (hill, neo-rural, urban in relation to second home) which appropriate, invigorate and consume these territories, according to differentiated temporal, spatial and cultural conceptions.

The response (and involvement) of local people (in this heterogeneous spectrum), the invigoration and the visibility of the future Network are open pertinent issues at this first stage phase of the initiative.

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