

Landscaping action - Towards a conceptual basis for the application of a Local Development Strategy in the framework of the Rural Development Plan (2007-2013)

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Abstract: *The CAP has been highlighting the relevance of multifunctionality for the future of rural areas in Europe. The productive goals are now giving room to post-productive functions to which the Rural Development Plan (RDP) for the period 2007-2013 is rather explicit. Nevertheless, most communities in remote rural areas are not enough aware of how to proceed towards the new challenges of multifunctionality, nor are the decision makers likely to, since the linkage between European and local levels is still very incipient. New governance models are necessary to overcome this constraint and to open-up opportunities for a durable rural development. The study of landscape change in those areas and the expectations for the coming future at local scale reflect the transformations that occurred in the agricultural policy arena. When expectations for the coming landscape are nothing but land abandonment and ageing of the population, one option could be to reinforce the capacity of policy to intervene according to differentiated objectives for such areas and consequent strategies toward a more predictable future. Intervening at landscape level is nowadays recognised as an adequate context for innovative planning design and management, which could minimise the lack of integration between environment and socio-economic needs. This article is based on analysis of the main CAP schemes underpinning the recent landscape changes and by assessing the reactions of different stakeholders to the CAP implementation at local level in the period 1990–2000. Nevertheless, the results of this analysis are not shown in this article, but they moved us to propose a model for defining a Local Development Strategy (LDS) as a basis for a more effective application of the RDP in remote rural areas.*

Keywords: *Landscaping action, Rural Development Plan, Local Development Strategy, Decision-making, New Governance models.*

Introduction

Portuguese rural landscapes have been subject to important changes over the last two decades partly as a consequence of the CAP implementation. In the framework of the current CAP reforms, the definition of the RDP is considered to be the second pillar of this policy and radical consequences of both socio-economic and environmental dimensions are foreseen. In marginal rural landscapes with difficult conditions for agriculture and high dependency of subsidies, such as Mértola municipality in Southern Portugal which was the subject of this research, profound and highly unpredictable change will probably take place. Decoupling of most of these subsidies from linked payments or direct payments is one policy orientation that may make a large contribution to these changes. Not only will incentives to maintain/intensify arable farming and livestock numbers be removed but also the incentives to maintain extensive farming on marginal land will disappear or at least be reduced. A scenario can be envisaged tending towards abandonment and constraints to the sustainability of many rural areas, especially with respect to social aspects.

When CAP impacts are evaluated at the local level, one of the assumed reasons for the ineffectiveness of this policy with regard to sustainability is the complexity of bridging European and local levels that takes account of the multidimensionality of decision making (Knickel, Renting and Van der Ploeg, 2004). Even in a simplified version, three decision making levels can be identified: (i) Individual and small groups at local level, (ii) Private and public decision makers at municipal, regional and national level, (iii) Private and public decision makers in the international sphere such as international conventions and multilateral agreements. The interaction between these groups has not been sufficiently established nor actively maintained in order to assure that conceptual principles are

applied to the policy, planning and management of the landscape (Bohnet and Smith, 2006; Lenz and Peters, 2006; Opdam, 2005).

Nevertheless, the RDP (MADRP, 2007) may also be an opportunity to introduce innovation in land management, provide ecological infrastructure, and build an attractive landscape or stimulate socio-economic dynamism in remote rural areas (Strijker, 2005). The application of these policy orientations on the ground represent a great opportunity to meet the agendas of Globalisation and Sustainability for which it is fundamental that RDP must follow integrative and inter-sector approaches to keep rural areas alive.

The landscape approach as based on an integrated concept is a potential way to combine the environmental and socio-economic dimensions of the new CAP and enable more predictable and coherent steering of the changing process and its management (Oliveira *et al.*, 2007). In this framework landscape has to be considered as a resource to provide environmental and socio-economic benefits and to generate private and public goods through combination of different functions such as production, regulation, information and life quality (De Groot, 2006; Millennium Ecosystem Assessment, 2003). The operationalisation of this principle implies innovative stimulus either to creativity, to planning and management, or to models of governance. Landscape assessment and contextual information can be a very helpful analytical tool for applying far better programmes within the RDP. Nevertheless it is fundamental to define a feasible framework for approaching landscape according to the features of the area and the existing dynamics in order to develop new models that assure effective transfer from research results to the landscaping action (Whyte, 1991). Therefore, the aim of this paper is to develop a conceptual basis for a LDS definition as a model to facilitate the implementation of the RDP. The paper makes use of empirical data from a local level (Municipality of Mértola, Portugal), CAP impact evaluation and the expectations that the users of the landscape have had about its future. Those results were obtained from another phase of the research and have not been presented here.

Methodological approach

The Mértola municipality was considered as a Case Study Area (CSA) to evaluate the CAP implementation at the local level. This is a typical Mediterranean area in Southern Portugal which is dominated by extensive farming systems where changes in the landscape over the last two decades were very significant, with afforestation of agricultural areas on about 11% of the municipal area. Despite the obvious transformation in terms of land cover, the new uses have also influenced the relationship of local people to the landscape, reflected through a progressive lack of functional and affective connections. This article makes use of this former information in a procedure for a definition of a LDS. Integration of these results has led to a model that emphasises the linkage between research and action and between the present situation and the vision for future landscape management. This model includes three stages: (i) Diagnostic, (ii) Project definition (iii) Commitment among stakeholders.

Results

The results from land cover change analysis show that landscape changes which occurred in the Mértola municipality over the past 20 years converged into an extensification and diversification of the landscape pattern compared with earlier periods. Nevertheless, this change took place mostly due to CAP implementation but without any strategic vision. Thus, in the current CAP framework, one of the consequences was the uncertainty about how the landscape will evolve in the future, which stresses the need for new approaches for thinking the coming landscape management, so as to integrate new functions with positive repercussions on rural development. On the other hand, in other areas of the municipality, land abandonment is broadly perceived as a threat and a constraint for future socio-economic development. Therefore, stakeholders' expectations in general do not envisage a promising future. In addition, the statistics show a trend towards new arrangements for farmland ownership. The lack of expectations will possibly interfere with the farmer/landowner decision-making regarding options for the use of their land, as has happened in other cases (Kristensen, 2003; Primdahl, 1999). This context highlights the RDP as an opportunity towards sustainability of marginal rural areas for the period 2007-2013. Its success depends on how much this policy would be able to go further and achieve effective results compared to former periods. With regard to reactions from decision-makers

who were interviewed, a more effective implementation implies a more sensitive perspective that should include other parameters than land use change, combining this with other local needs for congruent local development objectives.

Interpretation of the results of the interviews and policy analysis over time suggests that the major shortcoming of the current policy is not how it has been formulated. This is clearly an improvement compared to earlier regulations under the CAP. The problem is the linkage between the policy orientations and objectives and their operationalisation. The former CAP measures and schemes have been applied without any strategic vision at the local level. Each farmer/landowner has selected options for their farm individually without any concern for the landscape as a whole. The opportunity to use the RDP for a more coherent management of the landscape is quite relevant. But its implementation has to be planned in accordance with a vision and a strategy. It must be carried out as a transitional process guided by concrete objectives, instead of casual and unpredictable change. Defining a strategy at the local level is highly complex. Many factors are highly interrelated and mutually dependent on each other, forming a sort of seamless web (Elzen and Wieczoreck, 2005; Morris, 2003; Liedtka, 2000) with multiple trade-offs and uncertainties. This network presupposes the interaction between actors (private and public) and interaction in processes in which information and resources are exchanged, founded in scientific knowledge emergent from neo-institutional political science (Murdoch *et al.*, 2003). Furthermore it is necessary to be honest enough to allow uncertainty, learning and interaction as key elements.

The improvement of knowledge about different dimensions of a landscape as well as the integration of its results into a more qualified and democratic governance appear to be fundamental pillars for integrating the strategy for a local development (Cortner, 2000). Plans that are consistent with the visions, beliefs and aspirations of local people will have a greater chance of success than plans imposed without consideration of local opinions (Bohnet and Smith, 2006).

The model presented below seeks to integrate the most relevant results and the reflection from this research in a LDS context.

Towards a Local Development Strategy

From what has been presented above, two dimensions seem to be fundamental for: (i) linking research to action and (ii) defining a vision from the past/present to the future. These are the conceptual lines for the model for a LDS definition for which three stages have been identified: (i) Diagnostics, (ii) Project and (iii) Commitment. The diagnostics (Fig.1) should provide information about the main changes that have occurred in the landscape and about the way they have influenced the current situation.

This implies a multidisciplinary approach and aims at evaluating the level of sustainability of the landscape, and the reason for including the four dimensions of sustainability (Roca and Roca, 2007), i.e. Environmental, Socio-cultural, Economic and Institutional. It is fundamental to know more about perceptions and reactions regarding local processes. This is elicited through consultations with different actors through surveys.

This phase may be considered as the first step in a participatory approach. In addition to characterization of the present situation of the landscape, it is necessary to define a set of indicators that allow monitoring change over time. Here, consultation should also be part of the evaluation procedure.

The second phase of the model is the project (Fig.2) which implies that landscape objectives and a landscape management plan are defined. Despite the importance of research as a source of draft proposals as regards objectives and management actions, the project must be developed and built through interactive participation of at least representatives of the actors connected with the landscape, both decision-makers and other users. Workshops and discussions with decision makers and actors at different levels are a way to bring this about. In order to assure effective project implementation, it is necessary to select appropriate participatory methods. Research would be expected to contribute to the coordination of the implementation of the plan, information and capacity building of different stakeholders. It is important that a research team assume this task, since it is essential to be neutral at this stage and to assure active participation in implementation.

The third phase presupposes a commitment (Fig.3) from different parties involved so that responsibility for implementing the plan can be assigned in a democratic way. For this it is necessary

to define a suitable institutional and governance model, which, in its turn, defines the landscape management board that assures local commitment and sharing responsibilities. At this stage decision makers and decision takers should be close together.

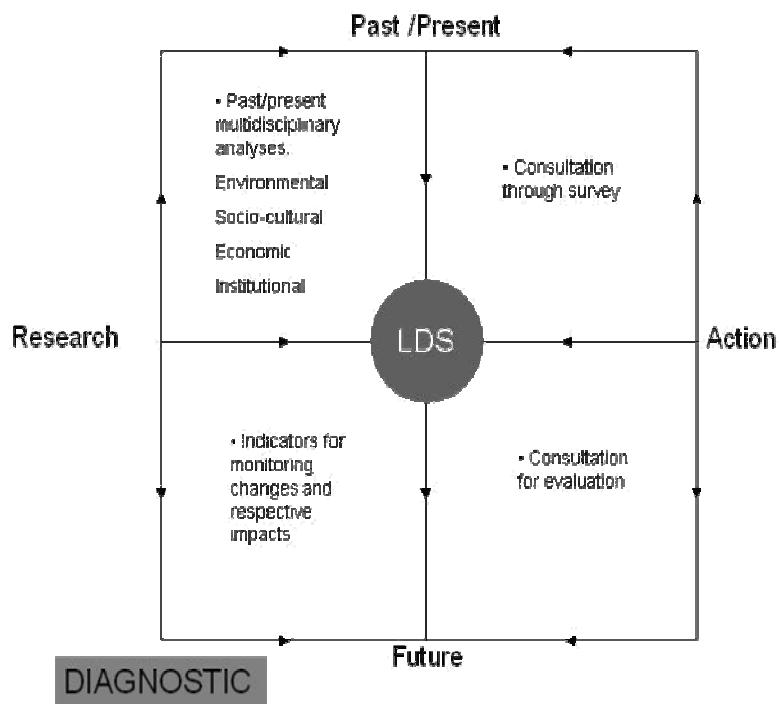


Figure 1. Diagnostic as the first phase for a LDS definition

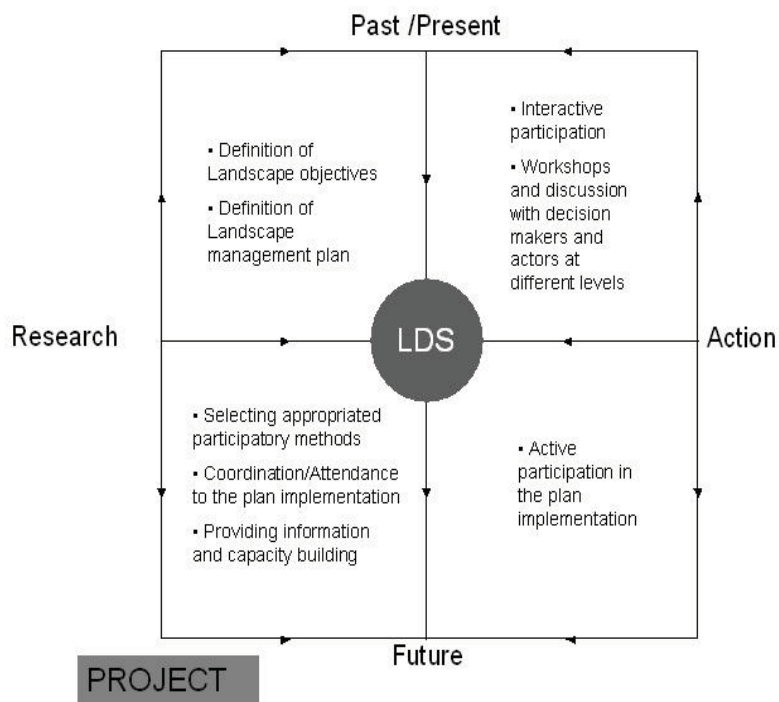


Figure 2. Project as the second phase for a LDS definition

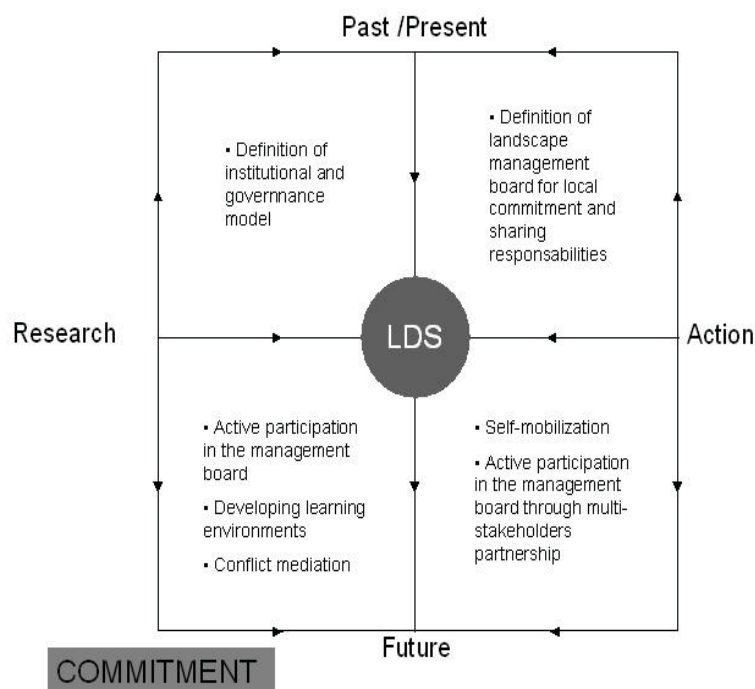


Figure 3. Commitment as the third phase for LDS implementation

Research actors should participate actively in the management board and contribute to developing learning environments and mediate conflicts when needed. In this phase of the process it is desirable that local stakeholders have already developed enough skills to promote a self-mobilization and an active participation in the management board through multi-stakeholder partnerships.

Conclusion

Among the definitions and concepts that this research has treated, landscape emerges here as a context for decision-making in which it is important to integrate research and action as well as the relationship between people and environment when looking at current management needs. The new CAP, through its RDP, offers important opportunities for the development of remote rural areas such as the Mértola municipality where agricultural production is no longer the basis for future development and where the socio-economic conditions are rather fragile. Nevertheless, without a LDS as a guide for RDP implementation, there is a considerable risk of losing the capacity for building up conditions for sustainability.

Due to several weaknesses of this kind, we conclude that priority has to be given to participatory support since a lack of expectations for the future implies special efforts to meet new possibilities for development. It is important to be aware that this implies important changes in the decision-making process, even though we saw from the results that decision makers are not particularly aware of participatory needs and do not appear explicitly in the list of proposals for improvement of CAP. Although a LDS for landscape management implies local participation, a broader network has to be built involving other levels. The complexity of different actions can be seen as an opportunity within the network to generate problem definitions, value priorities and causal perceptions on which to base the operation of a LDS definition. This interaction generates a particular kind of discussion that includes not only rationales and perceptions but also practices and routines to support and maintain the ideas about available and desirable policy means (Moors, Rip and Wiskerke, 2004; Gatzweiler and Hegedorn, 2002; Valve, 2002).

This research has been carried out at the local level. This raises an important question about the most feasible scale in which to approach landscape research and the respective participatory approach for a LDS definition. A coherent territorial unit in terms of structure, functions and processes in environmental and social terms, would make the best sense for an applied approach. Landscape

assessment can also be useful for basing this territorial boundary (Cancela d'Abreu, Pinto Correia and Oliveira, 2004). In this sense "Locality" has to be seen as a "meeting place" beyond the sum of individual local actors. It must turn into a local alliance attempting to create and realise new capabilities to intervene in a landscape restructuring processes. Channels will need to be opened for what can be designated as horizontal and vertical participation (Bass *et al.*, 1995). Horizontal participation refers to the interactions needed to ensure that issues are dealt with across sectoral interest groups, ministries and communities in different parts of the country. Vertical participation is required to deal with issues throughout the hierarchy of decision making from national to local levels, or from leaders to marginalized groups. The deeper the vertical participation within a given institution, the better the understanding and support for the strategy is likely to be. Likewise this concept can also give insight into the problem of linking European and local levels. This is one of the factors that has been identified as a constraint to effectiveness of the CAP in remote rural areas. The solution for integrating different scales does not appear to be the identification of a concrete level where the regional level may be more likely to be considered. It has to be based on a new concept of policy networking as a platform capable of assuring the necessary links so that policy and local realities are mutually informed. This new level must be able to improve equity, effectiveness and credibility. The existence of a Natural Park in the area could stimulate and facilitate the establishment of such a network.

Using the landscape multifunctionality as a conceptual background for application of the RDP implies a new approach (Oliveira, Cancela d'Abreu, Santos, 2008). New in terms of creativity for shaping differentiated landscapes, new in terms of attractiveness for its users, new in terms of involving people. This novelty may be called Landscaping Action. These are necessary at different political and financial levels so that localism and the post-productivist agenda can act as effective counterweights to the forces of globalisation and liberalism in a post-WTO landscape (Strijker, 2005), where RDP is framed and where CAP tends to go to.

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