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MAP Position Note

EMPOWERING RURAL AREAS IN MULTI-LEVEL GOVERNANCE PROCESSES



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MAP POSITION NOTE

MAP ALQUEVA

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Authors: Pompeu Pais Dias (Consulai), Pedro Santos (Consulai), Marta Mendes (Consulai)

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1. Current situation based on background research and evidence

The Alqueva region is located in the Alentejo province of Portugal and has recently undergone significant changes in terms of governance and rural development. The region is characterized by its vast expanses of arid land and a sparse population, which has historically made it difficult to attract investment and development, this has somewhat changed in recent years with the construction of the Alqueva dam and its irrigation perimeter.

One visible trend change in the region is the increasing focus on multi-level governance processes as a means of empowering rural areas. This approach recognizes the importance of involving multiple levels of government, as well as civil society and private sector stakeholders, in decision-making processes that affect rural areas. In the case of Alqueva, this has led to greater collaboration between local, regional, and national actors, as well as a more participatory approach to governance.

Citizen participation has played a crucial role in shaping climate change policies at all levels of government in Portugal, including in the Alqueva region. One example of this is the development of the national climate change adaptation strategy, which was developed in consultation with a wide range of stakeholders, including civil society groups and local communities. At the regional and local levels, similar participatory processes have been used to develop climate change action plans, which take into account the unique challenges and opportunities of each area.

In terms of minority groups, the Alqueva region has made significant strides in ensuring that marginalized groups are included in decision-making processes. This includes youth, migrants, and women, who are often underrepresented in governance structures. For example, local councils in the region have implemented gender quotas for elected officials, which has led to a more diverse and representative group of decision-makers. However, labour is still an issue in the region, namely agriculture seasonal work, where underrepresented minorities still play an important role.

The Smart Village model has also been implemented in some areas of the Alqueva region, with the aim of promoting more effective and efficient multi-level governance. This approach involves the use of digital technologies and innovative solutions to address the unique challenges facing rural areas. For example, some villages in the region have implemented smart farming practices, which use data analytics and precision agriculture techniques to increase crop yields and reduce water consumption. Other initiatives include the use of renewable energy sources and the development of e-commerce platforms to support local businesses.

Overall, the Alqueva region provides an interesting case study of how multi-level governance processes can be used to empower rural areas and promote sustainable development. Through increased citizen participation, the inclusion of minority groups, and the implementation of innovative solutions, the region is well-positioned to address the challenges and opportunities of the 21st century.

2. Position of the Multi-Actor Platform

2.1. Identified strengths and needs

The inputs from members of the multi-actor platform Alqueva reveal different perceptions about the involvement of rural actors and local level in multi-level governance in the Alqueva region. Some of the entities/programmes mentioned as strengths include Farmers and Irrigators Associations, the Leader Programme, Local and Regional Development Associations, Regional Agricultural Directorates, EDIA, and NGOs. However, one response indicates that there is not a good perception of rural actors' involvement in their connection to regional, national, and European governance.

Some of the responses highlight that despite the existence of debates and public consultations, the process is often conducted in a top-down logic and compliance with deadlines. Geographical proximity is referred to as a factor that can facilitate the connection to regional institutions.

Finally, some of the responses mention that farmers and other local stakeholders of high importance were involved in discussions about multi-level governance in the Alqueva region. In summary, although there are strengths in the Alqueva region, the involvement of rural actors in multi-level governance is still seen as a challenge, with the need to improve the perception and active participation of local actors in decision-making processes that can directly impact their activities and interests.

The multi-actor platform members highlighted some needs for the involvement of rural actors in multi-level governance in the Alqueva region. Among these needs are the decentralization of decision-making processes, the creation of citizen participation instruments in the definition of public policies, and the strengthening of the participation of representative associations of the sector.

Moreover, it is important to increase and improve the representativeness of actors in different levels of governance, for which competent and credible people must be willing to take up political positions. Members also highlighted the importance of developing awareness among rural actors about the importance of their opinion in decisions to be taken by regional, national, and European power bodies, creating a critical mass and claiming power.

The importance of monitoring, evaluating, and overseeing agricultural projects, or those with an impact on the local and regional economy, was also highlighted, as well as the need for more robust licensing or mandatory communication of agricultural projects.

2.2. Existing interventions and actions

Regarding good practices and examples of existing policies in the Alqueva region, several initiatives were highlighted. ADRAL (Alentejo Regional Development Association) and its regional delegations, which also have a physical representation in Brussels, were mentioned, as well as the forums promoted by the CCDR Alentejo (Regional Coordination and Development Commission of Alentejo), such as the Circular Economy Forum of Alentejo (FECA) and the Forum for Integrated Governance (GovInt), as well as Social Concertation.

The creation of associations and reflection groups was also mentioned as a relevant practice for involving rural actors in multilevel governance. These initiatives are important for strengthening the participation and representativeness of local actors and ensuring that their perspectives and needs are considered in governance decisions.

The bad practices identified by the participants regarding the involvement of rural actors in multilevel governance in the Alqueva region include the extinction of the Regional Directorate of Agriculture and the transfer of its competences to the CCDR, as well as the general distancing between public bodies and sectoral bodies related to the agricultural sector. In addition, leaders in public administration are often politicized and there are preconceived ideas among actors that can hinder effective collaboration.

Another issue mentioned by the participants is the lack of importance given to the opinions of rural actors and academia, resulting in their marginalization. In addition, there are past situations that have not been resolved among actors and result in the loss of energy and time.

In summary, the bad practices identified by the participants highlight the need to improve collaboration and communication between public and sectoral bodies, as well as to avoid politicization in public administration. It is also important to value the opinions of rural actors and to resolve unresolved past situations to avoid loss of energy and time.

Table 1 – Examples of actions taken by local actors

Forum da Economia Circular do Alentejo (CCDR Alentejo)

The Alentejo Circular Economy Forum is a platform created to promote and disseminate the principles and practices of circular economy in the Alentejo region of Portugal. The forum aims to foster the transition towards a more sustainable and circular economy in the region, by bringing together stakeholders from different sectors, including business, government, academia, and civil society. The forum serves as a space for dialogue, knowledge exchange, and collaboration, with the ultimate goal of developing and implementing circular economy strategies and initiatives that can contribute to the region's economic, social, and environmental development.

Through various activities such as workshops, seminars, and working groups, the Alentejo Circular Economy Forum seeks to raise awareness about the benefits of circular economy, identify opportunities and challenges for its implementation in the region, and foster innovative and collaborative approaches to tackle these challenges. By promoting a systemic and holistic view of the economy and the environment, the forum aims to create value and opportunities for businesses, improve resource efficiency and waste management, and enhance the quality of life of the citizens in the region.

<https://www.ccdr-a.gov.pt/forum-da-economia-circular-do-alentejo/>

Forum da Energia e Clima (CCDR Alentejo)

The "Forum da Energia e Clima" is an annual event held in the Alentejo region of Portugal that focuses on the topics of energy and climate change. The forum aims to bring together stakeholders from various sectors, including government, industry, academia, and civil society, to discuss the latest developments and challenges related to energy and climate change in the region. The forum provides a platform for participants to share their experiences and perspectives on topics such as renewable energy, energy efficiency, carbon emissions reduction, and climate adaptation. Through plenary sessions, panel discussions, and workshops, the forum seeks to foster dialogue and collaboration among stakeholders and to identify opportunities for cooperation and action.

The "Forum da Energia e Clima" is organized by the Alentejo Regional Coordination and Development Commission (CCDR Alentejo) in partnership with other organizations and institutions. The forum has been held annually since 2013, and each edition focuses on a specific theme related to energy and climate change. The forum is open to the public, and participation is free of charge. The forum is an important initiative in the region's efforts to transition to a more sustainable and low-carbon future.

2.3. Recommendations from the MAP

2.3.1 Recommendations for future rural policies

The MAP inputs on how to improve governance and stakeholder engagement in the Alqueva region include several suggestions. Firstly, there is a proposal for regionalization and involvement of representative associations in decision-making, in addition to the use of participatory democracy instruments. Restructuring local power is also seen as a possibility to improve governance.

Furthermore, it is important to have a greater connection and understanding between public and sectoral bodies. Another suggestion is the selection of leaders for public bodies through public competitions. The role of existing platforms and discussion forums in the region is also highlighted, although it is necessary to rejuvenate those responsible for the organizations and improve the remuneration of politicians and managers to attract people with the ability to hold these positions.

Finally, there is a suggestion to bring governance bodies closer to local actors, creating intermediaries who know and want to listen. In summary, the suggestions focus on strengthening democratic participation and improving communication and dialogue between stakeholders.

To improve the impact of the initiatives mentioned, several recommendations have been suggested by respondents. One of the recommendations is the streamlining, decentralization, and simplification of processes, as well as strengthening the role of LDAs/LAG. Another recommendation is to value the rural world and not stigmatize it, not subjecting it to rules that are difficult to apply or that make certain practices unviable.

It has also been suggested that there be decentralization, autonomy, and accountability, as well as coordination, convergence, and efficiency in the initiatives. Monitoring, evaluation, and oversight have also been identified as important for improving the impact of these initiatives.

Another important recommendation is the adequate dissemination and explanation of the respective added value of these initiatives, so that people can better understand their benefits and adhere to them. In addition, it is suggested to have fewer community directives and regulations to allow more flexibility in the implementation of initiatives.

Finally, it was suggested to create financial instruments that can support the activity of these organizations and/or projects, in order to make them truly impactful and recognized in rural areas. In summary, the recommendations focus on simplifying and decentralizing processes, valuing the rural world, efficiently coordinating initiatives, adequate dissemination, and creating financial instruments to support these activities.

2.3.2 Recommendations for future research agendas

The MAP Alqueva recommendations indicate various types of missing knowledge/information when it comes to involving rural actors and the local level in multilevel governance in Alqueva. Some responses mention the need for models, public policies, and innovation, as well as the importance of linking rural governance to regional, national, and European governance.

Other contributions point to an excess of irrelevant information, the need to improve interconnections and interdependencies between the rural and urban worlds, and knowledge of the various local realities, aspirations, perspectives, ambitions, and strategies.

Overall, the lack of knowledge/information appears to be a significant challenge in multilevel governance in Alqueva, as there are gaps in different areas. Efforts need to be made to improve communication and the exchange of relevant information between stakeholders and different spheres of governance. It is also important to identify and disseminate models and best practices, as well as innovation, that can be applied in the region. Additionally, it is essential to understand the local realities, aspirations, and perspectives of stakeholders in order to develop effective public policies.

3. Conclusions

In conclusion, the multi-actor platform Alqueva has revealed different perceptions about the involvement of rural actors and local level in multi-level governance in the Alqueva region. While there are some strengths in the region, the involvement of rural actors in multi-level governance is still seen as a challenge. There is a need to improve the perception and active participation of local actors in decision-making processes that can directly impact their activities and interests.

To address this challenge, the members of the multi-actor platform have highlighted several needs and recommendations. These include decentralization of decision-making processes, creation of citizen participation instruments, strengthening of the participation of representative associations, and increasing the representativeness of actors in different levels of governance. It is also important to develop awareness among rural actors about the importance of their opinion in decisions, and to monitor and evaluate agricultural projects.

To improve governance and stakeholder engagement in the Alqueva region, suggestions include regionalization and involvement of representative associations in decision-making, restructuring local power, and creating intermediaries who know and want to listen. Recommendations to improve the impact of the initiatives mentioned include streamlining and simplifying processes, valuing the rural world, adequately disseminating information, and creating financial instruments to support these activities. Additionally, efforts need to be made to improve communication and the exchange of relevant information between stakeholders and different spheres of governance and to identify and disseminate models and best practices.

In summary, the involvement of rural actors in multi-level governance in the Alqueva region is a significant challenge, but efforts can be made to improve the perception and active participation of local actors in decision-making processes. This can be achieved through decentralization, citizen participation instruments, strengthening of representative associations, and increasing the representativeness of actors in different levels of governance. Recommendations to improve the impact of the initiatives mentioned include streamlining and simplifying processes, valuing the rural world, adequately disseminating information, and creating financial instruments to support these activities. Finally, efforts need to be made to improve communication and the exchange of relevant information between stakeholders and different spheres of governance and to identify and disseminate models and best practices.

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