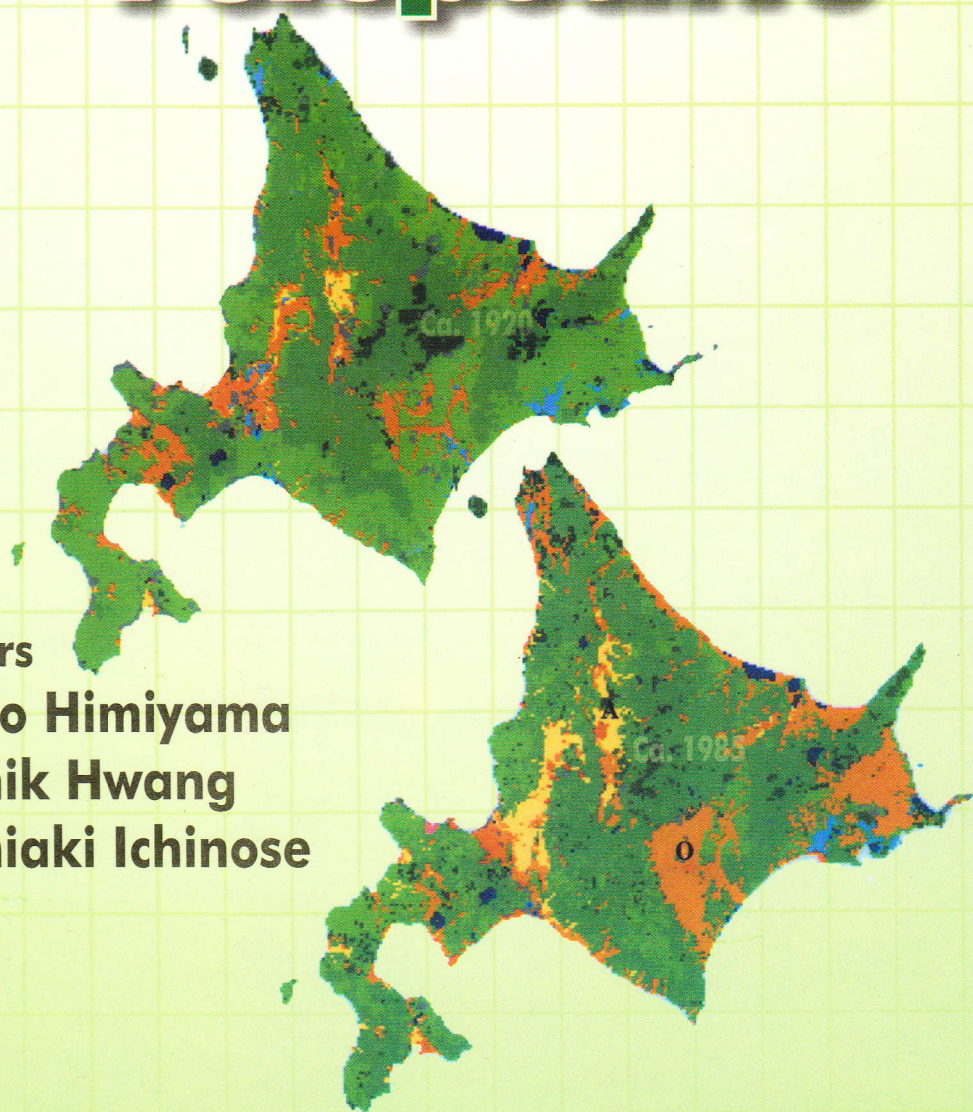


# Land-use Changes in Comparative Perspective



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## Sustainable Land Use in Portugal

*Ana Firmino*

### 1. QUESTIONING SUSTAINABILITY

Sustainable development entered our lives undoubtedly as a concern of modern societies about the negative environmental impacts caused by some human activities. Suddenly everything is presented to audiences with a "touch of sustainability", which makes the speech quite fashionable but often empty of contents.

This is not the first time that I have questioned the viability of sustainable development in a society based on a dominant nonsustainable economic model (Firmino, 2000; 1999a; 1999b). The fact that recently so many authors have expressed themselves in favor of an Ecologic Economy (Pillet, 1997), the New Economics of Sustainable Development (Robertson, 1999), Environmental and Natural Resource Economics (Tietenberg, 2000), to mention just a few, shows the pertinence of submitting development to rules and assessments more adapted to a true sustainable model. Until this shift into a "green economy" is put into operation, achieving sound progress in "nearing" sustainable development will remain impossible.

It is not our intention to discuss here the concept of sustainability, itself something quite complex and contested. The principle of sustainable development that "policies should aspire to a balance among societal, economic and environmental objectives, with emphasis on managing for future needs rather than just providing for society's immediate and ever-increasing demand for natural resources" (The



Landscape Institute, 1995, pp. 10–11) seems perfect to illustrate our point of view.

### 1.1 Examples of the Past

Before its frontiers were stabilized, Portugal was invaded by several peoples, some of whom stayed long enough to influence its culture, landscape, and economy. The Romans, who invaded the country in 154 B.C., implanted an agrarian system which supplied not only the local needs, but also exported wine and olive oil to Rome. According to Caldas (1991, pp. 10–11), the Romans had a perfect ecological sense in the plantation of orchards, vineyards, and olive groves.

The Islamic Moors, who succeeded the Romans in 711 A.D., also legated important irrigation systems. They left behind people who kept their physical characteristics and culture until recently. We are referring to the "Saloios" who occupy an area (Saloia Region) near Lisbon, which they have worked efficiently over the centuries, and nowadays supply the capital with about 40% of its needs for fresh fruits and vegetables.

Only a few of the older people still work the land according to traditional techniques, which though not so feasible in economic terms as the modern, do appear to be sustainable from an ecological point of view. They respect the contour lines, practice rotations, and do not work the land too intensively. Some still use manure and prefer traditional varieties over high-tech seeds. If they did not occasionally use some chemicals, they could be considered perfect organic farmers, with no reward for that!

But the scenario is changing. Young people do not want to work the land. They look for better jobs in the local administration (City Hall) or in the vicinity. Those who keep in touch with agriculture are often attracted by schemes for plague control that endanger the ecosystem (watersheds, soil and air pollution; phenomena of resistance; disarray in the trophic chain), or the use of hormones to accelerate the growing period. They are efficient in a conventional economic perspective but their activity will not be sustainable in the long term unless they adopt other techniques.

This efficiency in economic terms is only possible because farmers and other polluters are not responsible for the pollution they produce contrary to OECD recommendations since 1974 (C74–223). Used from the fact that it is desirable to shrink the number of agriculturists, those who remain simply intensify production in order to fulfill the market needs.

Most of the present dilemma, not only common to the Portuguese but to modern society in general, namely the European Union, is

directly traceable to a contradictory approach that points to an ecological perspective on the one hand, but surrenders to the conventional economic arguments on the other, as will be shown below.

## 2. LAND USE AND CAP ORIENTATIONS

Opening up of Portuguese economy was particularly forced when Portugal joined the European Union in 1986. The Portuguese trusted the European project to modernize agriculture and used the incentives offered by subsidies to invest heavily in machinery and new techniques of production. However, 14 years later the deficit in supply of food to the market remains high and about 60% of the country's needs are imported.

Furthermore, CAP orientations favor larger farms, which does not suit the majority of Portuguese farmers, especially in northern and central Portugal where *minifundia* (small landholdings) prevail.

The situation is critical, especially for smaller farmers who have few alternatives. Agri-Environmental Measures can give them some support, subsidizing sustainable systems of production such as organic farming, or providing incentives to maintain traditional land uses, as in the case of *Montado* (a traditional land use constituted by cork trees, mainly *Quercus suber*, where crops (cereals such as wheat or legumes) are sometimes grown in association with black hog production). This land cover is particularly important to halt the advance of desertification, already significant especially in areas along the border with Spain in the south (Fig. 8.1).

The LEADER programme is also appropriate for these local initiatives involving low investment since it supports diversified activities—from small units of food industry to rural tourism, handicraft, outdoor centers, etc.—which all together have contributed to the rediscovery of autochthonous potentialities, creating jobs, and animating local economies.

### 2.1 Examples of the Present

As a result of the CAP policy, slightly more than 3% of the farms benefited from 53% of the direct subsidies paid during 1997–98 (Organisation of the Common Market—OCM). This means that farms with a cultivated area of about 400 ha on average received 15 times more subsidy per cultivated unit than smaller exploitations. On the contrary, 80% of the farms received less than 25% of the global subsidy amount. They occupy only 12% of the Portuguese cultivated area ranging from 3 to 10 ha.

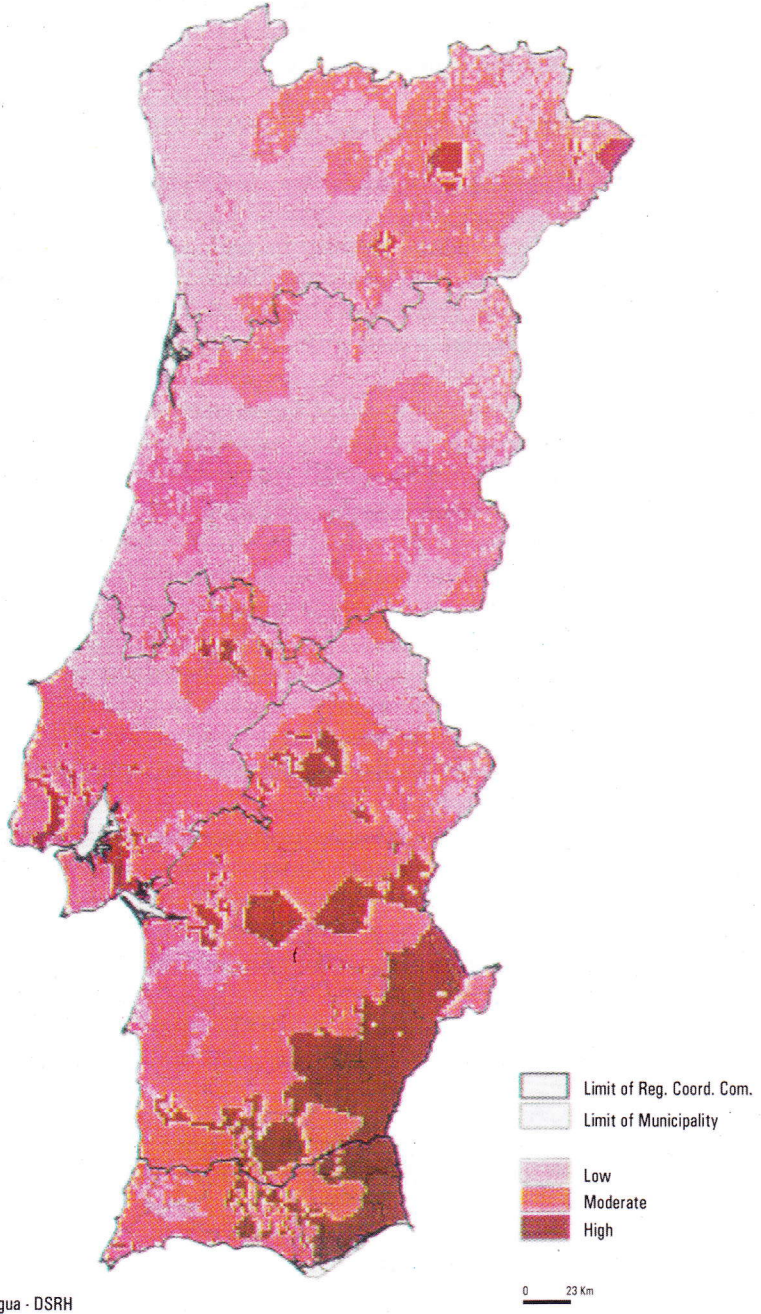


Fig. 8.1 Susceptibility to desertification



In a country where 10% of the population still depends on agriculture, there was a decrease of 25.5% of people working on farms in the period 1993–1997, 169,000 farms were out of business, and 180,000 ha were abandoned.

Interventions financed by the European Union included set-asides, intended to control overproduction of certain goods (cereals, milk, meat, etc.) characteristic of northern countries, and empty fields, which proved particularly tragic for latifundia (large landed estates). Actually, a recent study has shown (Correia, 1998) that if a landlord does not work the land because receiving a subsidy for letting it lie fallow is more profitable than risking a crop and paying wages to workers, the inhabitants of surrounding villages have fewer chances of getting a job.

As a consequence of these policies, contradictory in their goals since some encourage an increase in production based on a nonsustainable model of development, which has given rise to high rates of pollution and erosion in countries where it has been implemented, and others promote set-aside or support environmentally friendly production systems, some areas in a country very quickly lose their characteristics. It is difficult for the so-called ecological farmer to make the best use of his farm if his neighbours are polluting the watersheds, soils and air in addition to changing the landscape.

A good example of these contradictions are the traditional terraces of Douro valley, along which vineyards for the production of Porto wine have been growing for centuries. Under the Agri-Environmental Measures the farmer receives money for keeping the terraces; at the same time subsidies are also available under the Plan for Modernisation of Agriculture, to destroy the terraces and plant vineyards along the slope. The first is praised for compliance with recommendations in the manual for good agricultural practice, published by the Ministry of Agriculture; the latter is held up as an example to neighbors of modernization and competitiveness.

Unfortunately, the environment is not the only victim of these policies. Public health is also experiencing damage caused by devitalization of food, as recent research in the domain of sensitive crystallization has shown (Balzer-Graf, n./d.).

### **3. WHAT POLICIES FOR THE FUTURE?**

The examples given above are just a small sample of the disarray and contradictions inherent in the policies concerning agriculture and the rural community. Although politicians speak of sustainability as a target, between 1994 and 1996 the Agri-Environmental Measures represented solely 1.4% of the moderate budget for the agricultural

sector (DGDR, 1997a, p. 128). Furthermore, the amount paid per farm was minimal, and since these are essentially small units in underpopulated rural areas with little access to other subsidies and low income, in terms of feasibility they did not benefit much (*idem*, p. 129).

The incipient awareness of the Portuguese about the importance of sustainable planning is also responsible for many crimes against the environment. This is evidenced in constant attempts in the most populated areas to undertake construction in the National Agricultural Reserve (NAR) on the best agricultural soils as well as in the National Ecological Reserve (NER) created to preserve important biotopes. However, the Constitution of the Portuguese Republic in article no. 66, "Environment and Quality of Life" stresses the "right of everyone to a healthy and ecologically balanced environment, which implies that the State act in two areas: control of pollution and nature protection (Moura, 1998, p. 51).

Unfortunately, reality reveals that the State is the first offender against the environment when it allows cement factories to destroy a mountain and pollute a Natural Park (Arrábida), promotes infrastructures such as motorways on the best agricultural soils (Loures Valley), sometimes splitting farms and destroying investments financed formerly by the European Union in order to improve the quality of vineyards (Quinta da Romeira-Bucelas); allows lorries to cross National Parks (Peneda-Gerês); builds motorways which cross classified sites of Natura 2000 Net (motorway to Algarve); and allows areas under Protected Landscape to be urbanized (coastline in Esposende). How many other examples are necessary to make people aware that this is not sustainable development?

#### 4. CONCLUSION

In a recent conference in the Hague (The Netherlands) on the Model of European Agriculture (MEA), these concerns were discussed and the need for a European Land-use Policy stressed, which could safeguard societal values. Indeed some politicians are aware of these problems, due mainly to the conflict of interests in society and the pressure exerted by lobbies. In a study published in 1997 by the Ministry of Agriculture, it is clear that although rural development deserves special attention today, diverse and strong resistances and "lobbies" will try to disrupt any attempt to implement policies that might change the rules (DGDR, 1997b; p. 82).

Furthermore, in an article written by the Secretary of State for Agriculture (Barros, 2000), it is recognized that some contradictions in the implementation of policies in the past are now being restructured so



that in areas where under the Agri-Environmental Measures traditional land uses are subsidized (traditional almond groves for instance), farmers are not encouraged by other subsidies to afforest.

These are examples of well-intentioned attempts to correct distortions and injustices. However, as Day writes: "The crucial issue is, how long can we, as a society which hopes to remain civilised, survive if we give more value to use than to beauty, to what we (privately and materially) can get out of things rather than what we (commonly and spiritually) can give through them?" (Day, 1990, p. 181). As long as we as citizens do not feel the need to change, sustainable development will remain mere rhetoric!

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