

Recovering abandoned land in the Rioja region

Social innovation - land management solutions to the problem of abandonment

In the higher valleys of the Rioja region in Spain, farmland abandonment is an increasing problem. An Operational Group is identifying the main reasons behind this issue and carrying out activities to bring new farmers to the area and regenerate fruit production. At the same time, these actions contribute to conserving the soil, improving biodiversity and adapting to climate change.



CARNA is an agricultural technical advisory organisation, they are lead partner of this Operational Group called GORTA. Nacho Ruiz, from CARNA, "In 2017, a couple of years before the start of this project, the statistics department of the Autonomous Community of La Rioja carried out a fruit tree inventory in the region. The research showed that 117 walnut plots (32 hectares) were semi-abandoned and 93 walnut plots (19 hectares) were totally abandoned".

There are a number of factors which lead to this abandonment. The high valleys are very isolated, difficult to access and they have very steep slopes. In the region, urban growth is leading to the depopulation of rural areas, it is very difficult to find agricultural workers. Nacho goes on to explain "The rural population grows older and the farms are not taken up by the younger generation. This issue does not only impact the economic sustainability of the sector and the development of agriculture, but also directly affects the environment. It has a significant negative impact on landscape quality and increases degradation of the land, to the extent that both risks of fires and of invasive pests and diseases are increasing." The farms which did manage to maintain production, were generally producing low yields and low-quality products, they had not modernised and they lacked competitiveness.

The partners of GORTA Operational Group, advisory services for agriculture – both technical and legal, a company offering agricultural and forestry services (ie. planting, pruning and harvesting), and an association of producers, felt it was necessary to find solutions to this growing problem. Their ultimate aim was to professionalise and modernise techniques on existing farms and ensure abandoned farms were put back into production. Part of achieving these objectives was the need to rejuvenate and give value back to the walnut sector and the territory. This would have a positive impact on the socio-economic situation of the area and also on the agricultural land itself and the environment as a whole. They decided to pilot a business model for quality walnut production in the area, supporting farmers in both management of the agricultural production but also in marketing and adding value to the final product. Nacho says "We are creating a business formula with social objectives. It is about social innovation, in our case finding new services and models that solve the social problem of land abandonment or at least seek a more effective and efficient way than current alternatives, also establishing new social relationships and synergies".

In terms of activities, the project begins with an initial study to quantify abandoned and semi-abandoned farms in the pilot area. Next, the partners hold sessions to present their methodology to the owners of the plots, explaining the possible ways to improve productivity. In parallel, they also organise information sessions with the different municipalities where the project is being carried out.

Next, they carry out individual feasibility studies on each of the farms in the pilot area on the viability of crops on farms, taking into account specific growing conditions and yield. Together with the farmers, the project partners are creating individual business plans and helping to implement the recovery of the parcels.

So far there are about 12 plots where this project has supported the farmers to find an agreement between transferors and assignees.

The partners are also doing a study of the legal aspects related to transfer of land between people and to change uses. Nacho explains "We propose an alternative to land banks where people offer their land for rent, but in practice this leads to some ownership and financial issues for the farmers renting the land."

"A holistic approach to the area is essential, we are creating scenarios in which abandonment can be dealt with as a whole territory. This is why it is important to work with policy makers, farmers and other local people." – Nacho says. "Only by doing this can we make the area more attractive again, and bring farmers back to the region." The new business models proposed within the project will enable the farmers to create higher quality and more profitable products. These different improvements create a virtuous cycle along with the environmental improvements brought by these changes and effects on biodiversity and reducing wildfires.

"This issue does not only affect our region. According to a survey on crop yields and areas (Esysce) from 2017 of the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food and Environment, the abandonment of farmland in the whole of Spain exceeded one million hectares at the end of 2017. We are hoping our results will serve to help others tackle this problem across Spain and even Europe." – says Nacho.

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More information

- [Presentation](#)
- On the [EIP-AGRI website](#)