

PORTUGAL

Innovation & cooperation

Location

Arcos de Valdevez

Programming period

2014 – 2020

Priority

P1 – Knowledge transfer &
innovation

Measure

M20 – Technical Assistance

Funding (EUR)

Total budget 130 624

EAFRD 107 466

National/Regional 23 158

Project duration

2017 – 2019

Project promoter

Regional Association for the
development of Alto Lima

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www.facebook.com/Acontec-e-in-LoCo-Montanha-Alto-Minho-320200421865436/

A Technical Assistance project about empowering local and regional actors to work more effectively with rural communities in order to revitalise these areas.

Summary

Alto Minho is a mountainous area which despite its highly valued landscape and ecosystems, is facing significant socioeconomic challenges, abandonment and depopulation. The project aimed to revitalise the intervention area by empowering local and regional rural development actors to work more effectively with rural communities.



The project activities include creating mechanisms and routines for sharing knowledge and resources. This will bring R&D and local entrepreneurs closer together. It will also promote networking to facilitate information sharing and establish links between people and partner institutions, as well as between regional and local levels. The project will work closely with local communities and share its results so that others can learn from it.

Results

The project is expected to increase local actors' knowledge about new opportunities on how to improve the living and working conditions in their area, according to modern expectations and standards.

Local actors will improve their ability to draft and implement territorial development strategies so as to make best use of the resources in their area.

Increase the capacity of local actors to use and integrate the relevant information generated by the project into decisions regarding rural development at local and regional levels.

Lessons & Recommendations

- ❑ In projects of this type, particular attention should be paid to the establishment of networking routines and of mechanisms for sharing information.
- ❑ It is important to establish trust-based relations within the technical team and also between the technical team and the local community.
- ❑ Try to set up multidisciplinary teams to carry out such projects, and invest in knowledge transfer sessions, with more frequent interaction that is focused on the specific needs of territories.

Context

More than one-third of Alto Minho is covered by mountains. The area contains Portugal's only national park. Despite the highly valued landscape and ecosystem services, the area is facing significant socioeconomic challenges, land abandonment and depopulation.

To revitalise the area, local and regional rural development actors must be empowered to work more effectively with rural communities. A pilot project was proposed for the small village Sistelo. The background to the project is that:

- mountain areas are threatened by depopulation and abandonment. However, these areas are increasingly valued for their ecological and touristic functions;
- mountain village communities are often poorly involved and do not participate in decision-making processes;
- the innovation system is relatively distant from small communities and local entrepreneurs; and
- the dissemination and exploitation of local resources is still insufficient.

Objectives

The project aims to update the knowledge base on mountain areas based on exploratory work and proximity to these communities (observation in loco). It also aims to stimulate cooperation between the project partners and create the conditions to transfer knowledge, while linking it to the R&D system and to rural development actors.

Activities

Specific operational objectives have been defined and are served by a different activities, as described below.

Objective 1. Cooperate to better intervene in the mountain area and set up a process that engages not only technicians and institutional actors, but also local actors.

- Action 1.1. Coordination and stimulation of the partnership: general coordination, ongoing project management and stimulus of the permanent technical team (project partners).
- Action 1.2. (in loco): organisation of technical and scientific meetings in the pilot territory (Sistelo - Arcos

de Valdevez). The meetings will involve partners and researchers in a consultation process (collaboration with the Portuguese Society of Rural Studies), based on intense exchanges with the territory and its actors. (Organised field days on 21-22 October 2017 with 50 participants and on 18-19 January 2019 with 48 participants.

- Action 1.3. From research to innovation: foster the transfer of relevant knowledge that has been generated by R&D to the partnership actors and to the territory (selection of relevant R&D projects, conducting face to face sessions with researchers with the aim of transferring knowledge / results to the technicians of the partnership).
- Action 1.4. Space in Loco (Sistelo): creation of a pilot project space, with basic equipment and furniture, which ensures good working conditions for short periods of time for researchers, technicians and students. This pilot working space will help to bring R&D closer to the mountain community.

Objective 2. Testing methodologies for knowledge transfer and monitoring the changes in the Alto Minho mountain

The activities carried out under this objective have the purpose of providing the region with a suitable plan and instruments to monitor the changes in the mountain villages of Alto Minho. It also aims to increase the knowledge of local actors on how to access new opportunities that are linked to the landscape; nature and local quality products; providing good living and working conditions for families and individuals living locally and/or managing local resources; and to the heritage sector which must be consistent with modern expectations and standards.

Action 2.1. Knowledge transfer and monitoring: implementation of a participatory methodology to draft a detailed diagnosis of the territory. Design and test monitoring instruments which are adapted to the mountain context (e.g., pedestrian counting equipment). For this purpose, four thematic working groups were established:

- living and working in the Alto Minho mountain;
- agro-silvo-pastoral system in Alto Minho mountain;
- forest & biodiversity in the Alto Minho mountain; and
- Remunerated tourism and ecosystem services.

- Action 2.2. Involve and motivate: organised study visits for local actors and partnership technicians to observe good practices in mountain territories. This action led to a presentation of a communication to promote the project and the Alto Minho mountain at the ATLAS 2017 Annual Conference.

Objective 3. Value and disseminate knowledge, and foster innovation in the Alto Minho mountain

The project intends to train local actors to be able to draft (and implement) territorial development strategies. This will be done by making available in print and online a diverse set of documents that gather relevant information produced throughout the project. The focus of these strategies should be on how to optimise traditional agricultural and forestry systems, namely through the creation of synergies between the high natural value and landscape and emerging economic activities (e.g., nature tourism, remuneration for ecosystem services).

- Action 3.1. Technical and Scientific Publications: (i) *"It happens in Loco - Alto Minho"*, based on the communications and reflections made in the opening event of the project (digital); (ii) Technical report *"Mountain of Alto Minho - Knowing and Monitoring"*, based on the thematic reports of objective 2 and the seminar.
- Action 3.2. Promotion and dissemination: create and regularly post on the project's website and Facebook page; organise a final project seminar; organise an event promoting Alto Minho mountain.
- Action 3.3. Communication actions for non-technical audiences: design of a product with the objective of disseminating the results of the project, in an appealing format and with accessible language (leaflets and four publications according to thematic areas).

Main results

The project is currently at an intermediate stage of development and it will run until the end of 2019. As expected results, it is worth highlighting:

- (i) increased knowledge of local actors about new opportunities to improve the living and working conditions according to modern expectations and standards;

- (ii) increased capacity of local actors for cooperation; and
- (iii) an improvement in the capacity of local actors to draft and implement territorial development strategies, which enables better use of local resources.



In terms of current results, the following should be noted:

- the local community has provided positive feedback about the project. This is attributed mainly to the approach that favored a smooth and progressive connection between the community, and the technical team (field visits, in-depth interviews, seminar);
- an accelerated transformation dynamic has been observed in the pilot territory:
 - Initially, as a result of rural development policy interventions (e.g., restructuring of the extensive livestock production of native cattle, economies of scale in the use and management of common lands, restoration of built heritage);
 - in a second phase, due to the use of public and private investments (also with the support of EU funds) in the valuation and safeguarding of the landscape and cultural heritage, and in the promotion of tourism and leisure, taking advantage of the growing influx of tourists.
- local actors have a greater capacity to use and integrate the relevant information generated by the project into decisions regarding rural development at local and regional levels. This scenario confirms the importance of developing monitoring systems adapted to territorial, social, economic and cultural specificities.

Key lessons

This project works mainly on intangible components, involving several institutional actors, and investing in establishing close relationships with the local community. In projects of this type, particular attention should be paid to the establishment of networking routines and of mechanisms for sharing information. It is also important to establish trust-based relations within the technical team itself and also between the technical team and the local community. These aspects are crucial in order to ensure effective cooperation.

These processes, although relatively time-consuming, as well as resource-intensive, have an important impact in terms of capacity-building and empowerment of the socio-economic actors. This is particularly true for those involved in rural development (knowledge, attitudes and skills towards better cooperation and information

sharing). In this sense, it is considered important that projects should provide enough time to develop these types of activities, as well as including methods to identify and evaluate the outcomes at the individual and community levels.

In the scope of the capacity building of intermediate structures and despite the interest and availability shown by the invited researchers, there were difficulties in transferring the results of scientific research to operations at regional/local level (e.g., manage available resources in a smart/efficient way, innovate in a gradual manner). This emphasises the importance of having multidisciplinary teams, and of investing in knowledge transfer sessions, with more frequent interaction that is focused on the specific needs of territories.

Project partners

- Associação Florestal do Lima (Forest Association of Lima)
- Associação Sociocultural e Recreativa de Sistelo (Socio-cultural and recreational association of Sistelo)
- Comunidade Intermunicipal do Alto Minho Intermunicipal Community of Alto Minho
- Cooperativa Agrícola de Arcos de Valdevez e Ponte da Barca (Agricultural Cooperative of Arcos de Valdevez and Ponte da Barca)
- Associação Territórios com Vida (Association Territories with Life)
- Escola Superior Agrária de Ponte de Lima



Additional sources of information

www.ardal.pt/modules/historia/