

Communal Land Use and Management Systems in Northern Portugal

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1. Introduction

The participation of communities in the management of the local resources has an important role in rural development. This study characterises the participation of a local community in the process of managing common lands, namely the motivations and the involvement of the commoners (members of the user group) in decision-making, and the degree and nature of participation. We focus on types of participation and we describe how the local community uses the territory and how the commoners act in order to intervene on resources management.

The commons in Portugal

The common property in Portugal has existed since ancestral times. Actually the management of the commons in Portugal are based on legislation established in 1976 (laws 39 and 40) and the law 68/93. The law from 1976 represents an important shift in the history of the common lands in Portugal. After this period, the state gave the possibility of management and ownership to the commoners. In this law, the commoners can choose between two types of management, one with direct intervention of the government (modality B), and other with responsibility of management exclusively by the commoners (modality A).

In Portugal, there exists about 819 commons that are managed according to the different systems.

2. Methodology and objectives

This case study takes place in the common land unit “Baldio da Ermida”, located in the Gerês mountain of northern Portugal, inside Peneda-Gerês National Park. The *Conselho Directivo de Baldios* (CDB) is the structure that has management responsibility and the chosen modality A. The management of this common land is exclusively by the CDB, even if this unit is located inside a National Park. We have interviewed (5 qualified informants) and questioned the commoners (43 families) with the following objectives:

- 1- Characterise the community and their uses in the common land
- 2- Characterise the participation
- 3- Identify the organizational problems and issues.

3. Results and conclusions

1- Community and their uses in common land

The commoners are people living in Ermida rural village that have about 60 houses. They work in services like, construction, tourism and forest exploration. The village is surrounded by common land and the improvement of their natural resources directly affects their lives.

This common land, in 2001, was used by 218 commoners from 43 families. The most representative activities performed by these families were: ruminant grazing; shrub gathering; firewood collecting and water use. The grazing is the most important activity for the commoners for this unit. In Ermida, there are 616 goats, 61 cattle and 2 horses. The firewood is also important, 32 of the 43 families say that firewood is collected very often. The findings indicate that the commoners collected 100 tonnes of firewood per year.

2- Participation

The commoners have a strong sense of stewardship regarding the “baldio” and participate in different ways, more or less actively depending upon the situation and decisions at stake. In addition, it is clear that some individuals have been more permanently involved in the leadership positions and access to such leadership has been closed to others, due to various factors.

3- Organizational problems and issues.

In Ermida village, the property rights for the common property regime is very well specified and, by definition, exclusive to the commoners. The commoners have their rights assured because they receive appropriate legal support from the government and, normally, they try to regulate the access to the natural resources. This communal organization establishes rules and punishes the members that neglect the “logical use” performed by secular rules. This approach prevents an overuse, but also promotes conflicts. The existence of these rules attempts to avoid “the tragedy of the commons”, but this organization has other issues.

One important issue is the **new-users** of the common land. A recent problem associated with the new-users is the grazing of horses grazing, they are not a traditional livestock and, in most cases, they don't belong to the commoners of Ermida. Another problem is the new motorized leisure vehicles (example 4x4) that are being used, but do not fit the traditional rules. For these new issues, the commoners lack the ability to improve and implement new rules by consensus.

The **decision-making** is another issue that can affect the success of the communal organization. In general, the decision-making depends on the immediate necessity of funds to improve village infrastructures. For example, when the commoners need funds to build a new road, they decide to harvest some trees in order to get the necessary funds. This logging decision normally is made without technical preoccupations and dismisses woodland characteristics.

Another problem in the context of decision-making is the inertia of some elements of the community, namely the time for the decision. This important phase of community organization depends on a few commoners. This fact increases the lack of transparency and can justify that some members don't trust the community management. The inertia of commoners can be identified as a main factor that may lead to tragedy.

This communal system of resource management will persist if both; the “logical use” is consonant with the commoners rationality and able to generate direct benefits for the commoners. For continuity of this system, the management should have one systemic vision.

Bibliography

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