

## ***The local landscape attractiveness as the ground for innovative land management: acknowledging new place based interactions for resilient farm systems***

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**Abstract:** Around towns of Alentejo region, Southern Portugal, the landscape is dominated by an agricultural mosaic, where small scale farming dominates, composed mainly of olive groves combined with pastures, fruit orchards, and vegetable gardens, in the most fertile and water abundant soils. This is a totally different pattern than the large scale landscape of the extensive silvo-pastoral systems in the latifundia, normally associated with the region. It is not the most known, but it is the landscape most people live in or see in their everyday life.

These small scale farm units have increasingly lost their importance as production units over the last decades, even if farming has been maintained by aging local population. In the last two decades, these small farms became extremely attractive for new comers, who settle in the rural context as lifestyle farmers. These new comers have often high education and income and search for a new life quality. Further, there are local people who return to the land, due to the new values but also the result of the on-going economic crisis. Farming and the production of food have been losing their importance – but this importance is increasing again in multiple complex modes, contributing to the attractiveness of small scale rural areas. As farming is concerned, new arrangements emerge: the new owners may be able to keep farming, often with new or reshaped production objectives, markets and models; they may search for associated older farmers in the area who support them with their knowledge and with this maintain the traditional farm systems; they may change investing in niche productions; or they may let others, new comers or locals, use their land. According to the Multi-Level Perspective (MLP), these multiple land management arrangements, where production income is not the main driver and lifestyle a ground motivation, may be considered as a niche. The different actors are not formally organized, but new community and place based networks are emerging, working towards innovations that deviate from existing regimes. In the multilevel and multidimensional network of players that characterise rural areas today, this networking profile and capacity has a crucial role for the farm systems resilience. Nevertheless, in order to unfold, these innovative land management arrangements require close interactions with the dominant regimes, which are still missing or do not function.

Based on a MLP analysis of the new management models and using a local case study in Southern Portugal, this paper discusses, i) the role of the local landscape and of the place based interactions in the emergence of new and innovative farmland management arrangements, and ii) the issues limiting the anchoring of this niche in the agricultural regime and therefore also limiting its unfolding.

**Keywords:** lifestyle farming, countryside consumption, multi-level perspective, place, farm management

## **Introduction: Countryside consumption and transition to new farming models in the light of transition theory**

### **Sub-heading style**

The increasing use of the countryside as a space of consumption (e.g. for amenity, living space, leisure activities) has been recognized in recent literature. This has been constructed as part of a transition to a differentiated countryside for example in England, whereby productivist industry operates alongside post-productivist activities such as nature conservation and amenity (Murdoch et al., 2003). In his Australian research, John Holmes introduced the concept of functional trajectories in rural areas, where the relative weight of production, consumption and protection functions are being altered, as consumption and protection contest the former dominance of production values. These changes in the relative weight of the three main functions result in new and complex modes of rural occupation, e.g. new modes of human use of the rural space (Holmes 2006; Holmes 2012). However, the resulting processes in farming, grounded in new motivations, is not yet fully understood and described. In the transitional trajectories as defined by van der Ploeg (2009), consumption corresponds to “deactivation”, which is characterized by a reduction of agricultural activities in the rural areas and a shift towards leisure, nature reserves, rural dwellings, and bio energy production. Countryside consumption can thus be understood as a driver of farm and farmland management grounded in quests for rural lifestyle, healthy food and leisure, which may or may not be closely linked to production.

As also described by van der Ploeg, these transitional trajectories are most often the result of a variety of contradictions and complex dynamics formed by the interaction of diverging processes. Among these, the active construction of new degrees of autonomy (e.g. through on-farm processing, direct marketing) and new actors in farming, is highly relevant in areas where consumption of the countryside is increasing. Recently, Marsden (2013) identifies the emergence of renewed interest in production functions in farming areas in Western countries, particularly after the food crisis of 2007-8, and combined with an urge for ecological efficiency, what can be considered a move to sustainable intensification (bio-economic productivism). This trend can be particularly relevant in European peripheries, where production has been partly marginalized, but emerging concerns for food safety and food autonomy push for a revival of production even in less competitive conditions within the global agriculture (Ortiz-Miranda et al 2013).

Intermingled in diverse ways with productivist drivers, countryside consumption definitively changed the way in which the concerned actors deal with farming, or involves the introduction of new actors to the farming sector. Related to this, a new form of farm management can be defined as lifestyle farming, where the rural landholder generally derives his/her income primarily from non-farm sources, and in any case the income generated from agriculture is not the main driver of land use and the value of agricultural production tends to be less determinant for his/her choices than other factors (Pinto-Correia et al, 2014). Yet, the lifestyle farmer is also a producer, and since he/she manages agricultural land, countryside consumption also has an impact on the management of the physical landscape and on agricultural sectors.

According to the transition theory, TT (Elzen et al 2012; Geels 2004) lifestyle farming can be conceptualized as a ‘niche’, as it involves a major and radical change to the way agricultural land is used. It relates to new beliefs and values, new technologies and practices, new configurations of actor groups, new networks and it may lead to new policies, or in any case to renewed use of the existing policy framework. In essence, it represents a mismatch with the existing commercial farming structures and practices (the ‘regime’ following TT) and a constraint on the opportunities existing in the emergent push towards sustainable intensification. Although the shift towards lifestyle farming has been growing for several decades, most often there has been no collective or shared intention to push for a radical change at the regime level. It is a change originated in local

actors, taking place at local levels in many different locations throughout Europe. Niche actors or groups of actors engage with organizational structures at regime level in increasingly significant ways. Because of its fuzzy character, the relations with the concerned regimes, which include, besides farming, housing and conservation, are complex and require a detailed analysis within an updated conceptual framework, in order to be disentangled. The transition theory can bring some new insights.

### **Southern Europe particularities: lifestyle farming in the Mediterranean**

Around most towns in the Alentejo region, Southern Portugal, the landscape is dominated by an agricultural mosaic, where small scale farming dominates, composed mainly of olive groves combined with pastures, fruit orchards, and vegetable gardens, in the most fertile and water abundant soils. This is a totally different pattern than the large scale landscape of the extensive silvo-pastoral systems in the latifundia which is normally associated with the region. It is not the most known, but it is the landscape where most people live or see in their everyday life.

These small scale farm units have increasingly lost their importance as production units over the last decades, even if farming has been maintained by aging local population. But in the last two decades, these small farms became extremely attractive for new comers, who settle in the rural context as lifestyle farmers, or simply as new residents (permanent or week-end houses). The profile of the new farmers is extremely diversified. The new comers have higher economic possibilities, often rebuilding the houses and investing in the land. They search for a new life quality. Their origins are multiple, including both new entrants and individuals issuing from a local family. There are urbanites who have moved to the countryside in a quest for the rural lifestyle, and are totally new in the area, having bought the land they have now. These are what we consider the urban newcomers. Some may be foreign, attracted by the southern European climate and lifestyle. There are also local people who had an urban related childhood, while sometimes the family farmland has been kept in the family, and as they feel an attachment to their family place and an aspiration to better life quality, they settle in the family farm or in the region. These are considered here as returnees. And then there are the locals, local people who have always lived in the farm, which used to be the main source of income for the family; whereas the new generation has another job, nevertheless deciding to stay in the farm, as the farm lifestyle is increasingly attractive and compatible with new flexible professions and increased mobility and accessibility of these areas. A range of different combinations in between these existing major types takes place, with many hybrid types, generating high diversity and richness in lifestyle farming. Overall, all these actors share the attraction to a new lifestyle and proximity to nature, being driven to the area in the search for these or due to casual motives like family, close friends, or work. The most significant factors contributing to their permanence in the area relate to the landscape quality, to social life and to the practice of agriculture.

As for farming and the production of food, they have been losing their importance in the last few decades – but their role is increasing again. New and often innovative arrangements emerge, some of them as retro-innovations: the new owners may be able to keep farming, often with new or reshaped production objectives, markets and models; they may search for associated older farmers in the area who support them with their knowledge and with this maintain the traditional farm systems; or they may let others, new comers or locals, use their land. The mixture of the different trends signals the emergence of new management arrangements, where the traditional cooperation in land management and the neighbour relations are sometimes reshaped. But also, new alignments in the production and consumption chain, which signal behavioural and structural changes in food systems and not only a new rural but also a new food equation (Ortiz-Miranda et al 2013)

Lifestyle farmers introduce different socio-cultural dynamics, interests in spatial landscape, management practices and professional profiles, while at the same time the overall spatial landscape

pattern is maintained, despite minor changes. These farmers acknowledge the very hard conditions to develop small scale agriculture at present and in the Portuguese context, but still in most cases they aim to be as much managers of the land as food producers. There are both the cases in which lifestyle farmers adopt very contrasting agricultural and landscape management practices (often following organic and environmental-friendly paradigms) and cases where local tradition is followed strictly. In the latter, they are normally performed together with local settled residents, which have the traditional farming knowledge. In a few cases, hybrid practices seem to emerge. The intensity and type of interaction with local settled residents varies tremendously, depending strongly on the lifestyle land managers' attitude, but also on the specific local social circumstances.

### **New management arrangements and new policy responses**

In TT, anchoring is the process through which a niche finds its way into a regime. The concept conveys that an innovation developed in a niche is not passively adopted by a regime, but the links are actively constructed by individuals and organisations at both niche and regime level. The concept thus allows focusing on relations and translations between niches, and between a niche and the regime, which can lead to reconfigurations at the regime level. Perhaps most notable about the anchoring of countryside consumption is the lack of normative institutional anchoring: formal or informal rules about what is desirable which can be embedded in laws, regulations or policies (Elzen et al., 2012).

Lifestyle land management is largely unrecognised in agricultural policy in the study site. Instead, policies are clearly oriented towards commercial production. As a result there are several unintended influences on the evolution of lifestyle land management. Tax advantages associated with managing agricultural land, intended to assist commercial farmers and their successors, can also be of advantage to lifestyle land managers. In Portugal there are no legal requirements to utilise agricultural land for commercial agricultural production; land is for sale to the highest bidder, making it easily transferred from commercial to lifestyle use. However, legal reporting requirements (e.g. livestock tracking and welfare reporting) are also designed for commercial-scale farming operations and can act as a barrier to less intensive, leisure oriented management of livestock. Lifestyle land managers are often excluded from traditional sources of state support (e.g. agri-environmental funding) through lack of awareness. Despite its increased emergence, lifestyle land management thus continues 'under the radar' of official state practices.

The increased value of the countryside as a consumption object creates a potential for new forms of production and land management, which remain partially unseen, and therefore do not unfold as could otherwise be possible. The individuals acting as lifestyle farmers are in many cases unseen farmers – despite their dynamics, their investment capacity, their entrepreneurship, their social capital. Their role as aware landscape inhabitants and managers may be the way for a higher recognition of the value of rural and agricultural landscapes, through an increased interaction among the separate regimes involved in them.

The role of lifestyle farmers is also adding value to the rural spaces where they get installed, as new place-based economy constructions get started but also new re-alignments of the production-consumption chains are pushed, capturing local and regional value between rural and urban spaces (Horlings and Marsden 2011). This should not be underestimated, as it follows in a straight way the new eco-economy paradigms.

Further, the issue of space and scale needs to be considered, if these new farming processes are to be disentangled. Besides location and a reasonable distance to large urban centres, local geo-physical landscape features clearly have an impact on where lifestyle land management is most likely to occur, and as such this requires a stronger policy rooting in the physical space and the landscape pattern.

To conclude, based in our study case, further development of lifestyle farming in rural Mediterranean might play an important role in the vitality of rural areas and in their unfolding. As well as in food security and sovereignty – in a context of considerable vulnerability at the global level (Lazo 2010). A key aspect concerns the inclusion of smaller scale, less or non commercial-oriented, farming approaches - such as lifestyle farming - in the policy design process. This means that existing rules should consider the advantages in supporting their unfolding, but also in general be flexible enough to allow their existence. As it is today, many current activities have problems in being legal simply because they cannot meet standard procedures designed for larger scale, more market competitive commercial farming, remaining illegal and refraining the unfolding of such approaches and local development. In this way, with such a change in licensing and regulations, current policies would constrain this type of rural innovation to a lesser extent. Not to mention that the current policy context excludes these small scale diversified farms from many existing policy support possibilities, as earlier discussed.

With regard to the latter, an emerging issue for discussion is the observation that innovation contains a considerable level of risk involved. If the need for social innovation in rural areas is to be taken seriously, than the criteria for selection of projects needs to be broadened to include initiatives that do not follow conventional “recipes of success” (often dictating selection criteria of supporting measures), thereby assuming the risk of un-success involved in any innovation. This would mean supporting installation of new actors and new projects and initiatives per se for a given period of time. Giving priority to these kinds of support before investing in specialized education, e.g., was discussed amongst stakeholders involved in this work, although this can be understandably difficult in periods of downsizing state supports.

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