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Theme 1

HOPING FOR A BRIGHTER FUTURE: SOCIAL IMAGES ON THE DEVELOPMENT PROCESSES OF PORTUGUESE RURAL AREAS¹

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Introduction and Contextualization

This paper aims at unveiling, although in an exploratory way, the images of rural development processes and agents, conveyed by a sample of Portuguese population surveyed in the ambit of the research project Rural Matters. Rural development in Portugal is difficult to analyse, especially because of the persistent political negligence of rural areas (Figueiredo, 2004) and of the absence of plans and policies during decades. This situation moderately changed from 1986 on, with the adherence of the country to the European Union and, in consequence, with the application of the Agricultural Common Policy. However, only recently (years 2000) a progressive – although not very expressive until now in terms of its materialization – shift from a sectorial approach (agriculture) to a more territorial one (base on the multifunctional character of rural areas) may be identified. The analysis of the various programs and strategies to promote rural development (Batista and Figueiredo, 2011; Melo e Azevedo *et al.*, 2013) shows a continuous emphasis on agricultural issues and the persistent neglect of other dimensions of rural areas.

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The continuous emphasis on the productive (agricultural) rural, which in reality possesses a small expression in Portugal (e.g. Oliveira Baptista, 2006; Melo e Azevedo *et al.*, 2013) in the programs and strategies for rural development demonstrates the political (ir)relevance of rural territories and the lack of a consistent and integrated approach to rural areas' problems. These aspects are visible in the representations of the Portuguese population regarding the past, present and future development paths of rural areas, the identification of the main agents and entities responsible for it, as well as the evaluation of the political actions towards it. As described in the following section, Portuguese population foresee a bleak future for rural areas, based on the past political and policy interventions and problems they have been persistently faced. Additionally, despite the negative evaluation on governments' action towards rural territories, the majority of the respondents consider that it should be responsible to develop those territories which are viewed as extremely important in economic and social terms.

Methodology and Findings

The Rural Matters questionnaire application was carried out in 31 Portuguese municipalities between November 2013 and October 2014. 1853 valid questionnaire responses were obtained via an online form or in person. Data was then entered, treated and analysed using IBM SPSS Statistics 21. The 40-question questionnaire was split into three parts: the first one was concerned about peoples' views on the rural and rurality; the second was about their consumption processes of rural areas (through both visiting rural areas and consuming rural products); the third one dealt with the perceptions on the past, present and future development of Portuguese rural areas. This paper deals solely with the third part of the questionnaire.

The characteristics of the sample are summarized in Table 1.

Table 1. Main characteristics of the sample, N=1853.

<i>Gender</i>	<i>N</i>	<i>%</i>
Female	1038	56.1
Male	813	43.9
<i>Age</i>	<i>N</i>	<i>%</i>
15-24	239	12.9
25-34	422	22.8
35-49	373	20.1
50-64	392	21.2
65+	427	23.0
<i>Qualifications</i>	<i>N</i>	<i>%</i>
Primary education (1° CEB) or lower	329	17.8
Middle school (2/3° CEB)	238	12.9
Secondary education	447	24.1
Higher education	837	45.2
<i>Municipality (by level²)</i>	<i>N</i>	<i>%</i>
Level 1	1280	69.1
Level 2	311	16.8
Level 3	262	14.1
<i>Rural/urban³ parish</i>	<i>N</i>	<i>%</i>
Rural	147	7.9
Urban	1706	92.1

Respondents were asked to measure the current level of socioeconomic development of Portuguese rural areas (in general), ranging from 1 (undeveloped) to 5 (highly developed). More than half of the respondents have classified the level of socioeconomic development of rural areas as low (6.6% of the respondents answered “1”, while 44.1% answered “2”). 40.0% have settled for middle ground, answering “3” (not positive nor negative) and just 9.3% of the respondents think rural areas are developed (8.0%) or highly developed (1.3%). The average for all respondents was 2.53 (out of 5); it is higher among older respondents (2.63 among people aged 65+), people with lesser qualifications (2.67 among those with complete or incomplete primary education), and rural dwellers (2.64, with urban residents averaging only 2.52).

Respondents were asked to rate (again, from 1 to 5) past and present Governments with respect to their actions regarding eight different issues that concern rural areas. They have attributed, in average, a negative rating to governments in all the considered aspects (see table 2).

² Level 1 municipalities: population density higher than 500 inhabitants/km², total population higher than 40000 inhabitants); level 2: population density higher than 500 inhabitants/km² with total population lower than 40000 inhabitants + population density between 100 and 500 inhabitants km² with a total population higher than 25000 inhabitants; level 3: the remaining municipalities.

³ INE [Instituto Nacional de Estatística, www.ine.pt] criteria were used to determine which parish is rural or urban.

Table 2. Respondents' perception of governments' intervention in eight aspects related to rural areas.

<i>Aspects of rural areas</i>	<i>Average rating</i>	<i>% negative ratings (1 or 2)</i>	<i>% neutral ratings (3)</i>	<i>% positive ratings (4 or 5)</i>
Forestry	1.97	76.6	17.3	6.1
Socioeconomic conditions of the local population	1.98	74.8	18.5	6.6
Diversification of economic activities	2.01	73.3	20.6	6.1
Agriculture	2.12	70.3	22.9	6.9
Preservation of local traditions	2.12	68.2	21.4	10.4
Environmental protection	2.30	62.0	25.9	12.2
Preservation of local built heritage	2.30	61.2	25.5	13.2
Tourism	2.89	35.3	37.4	27.3

The attention given to forests and local populations' socioeconomic conditions are the aspects that respondents think the governments' action was more negative: around three fourths of the respondents have rated those as negative, with an average rating below 2 (out of 5). This comes in line with other findings from the data analysis, in which was found that almost half the respondents have characterized rural areas with at least one characteristic that channels a *disadvantaged* rural; in addition, when asked about which aspect related to 'forestry' they think of first when thinking about that subject, more than 30% of respondents have responded 'forest fires', which seems to be a major concern for respondents.

Tourism (rural tourism) is, by far, regarded by the respondents as the aspect in which the governments have acted better. Despite that fact, the average rating attributed by respondents is still negative (2.89 in a 1-5 scale). Older people (65+) and those with lesser qualifications (primary education or less) tend to have a more negative perception of governments' actions than other age and education groups.

Respondents were asked to choose up to three entities that they consider to be responsible for driving and financing the present and future rural development processes. Although the great majority of the respondents see past (and present) governments' intervention in rural areas in a negative light, 76.3% of respondents think the national government should be responsible for financing rural areas and 62.1% say the government is the main responsible for the current and future development of rural areas.

Table 3. Entities responsible for developing and financing rural areas, according to respondents.

<i>Entity</i>	<i>Responsible for the development of rural areas</i>	<i>Should finance the development of rural areas</i>
European Union	30.7%	47.2%
National government	62.1%	76.3%
National tourism entities	8.5%	10.9%
Municipalities	48.8%	33.4%
Parish councils	27.0%	8.5%
Local development associations	11.4%	7.9%
Local and regional tourism entities	7.0%	5.1%
Local and regional entrepreneurs	15.7%	15.3%
NGOs	1.7%	1.0%
Local citizen associations	5.8%	2.6%
Local citizens (individually)	12.5%	3.4%
Tourists	2.3%	3.9%
All Portuguese citizens	11.0%	14.1%
Doesn't know	2.8%	3.9%

People with higher levels of education tend to mention the EU more than other groups – 38.5% of the respondents with a degree say the EU is responsible for the development of rural areas (only 14.9% among the less qualified) and 54.4% say they should finance the development of Portuguese rural areas (again, only 34.1% among the less qualified).

In general, younger and more qualified people tend to mention both tourism-related entities and local entities (municipalities, local development associations, local and regional entrepreneurs, citizens) more often than older and less qualified respondents, which seems to channel a view on rural development that's not “grassroots” but, instead, multi-level – despite the fact that younger and more qualified respondents seem to mention a broad range of institutions more often than older and less educated respondents, 76.2% of the respondents with ages 15-24, 81.3% among 25-34 years old and 79.8% of the respondents aged 35-49 still think the national government should be the responsible for financing rural areas.

For more than half of the respondents, the future looks bleak for most rural areas, taking into account the past and present situation of rural territories in Portugal: 51% of the respondents (a percentage that rises to 63.1% among people aged 65+ and 65% among those who live in a

Level 3⁴ municipality) think rural areas will be abandoned in the future. 12.9% think they will be exploited for/supported by rural tourism, 11.2% think they will be diversified, integrating new people and activities, and 9.5% defend they'll be dominated by small scale, traditional agriculture. On the other hand, 51.6% of the respondents wish rural areas would be more diversified (in terms of inhabitants and economic activities), 14.2% wish they were dominated by nature and its protection, 7.2% defend that rural areas should be primarily dominated by small scale agriculture, 6.8% by large scale agriculture and 6.5% by productive, profitable forestry.

Despite rating the development of rural areas as poor and the governments' actions' even worse, the vast majority of respondents defend that rural territories are very important to the Portuguese economy, society and tourism. Again, in a 1-5 scale (1 meaning "not important" and 5 "very important"), 52.4% of respondents think rural areas are "very important" to the Portuguese economy (average: 4.27). 57.1% say they're "very important" for Portuguese tourism (average: 4.40) and 46.4% said the same about the importance of rural areas for Portuguese society (average: 4.16). To sum up, the general idea about rural territories' development and their importance for the country in the 21st century seems to be consensual among most of the questionnaire respondents: although they view rural areas as very important and defend their development should primarily be driven by centralized public entities and public funds, they rate very negatively both the socioeconomic development and the performance of past governments regarding rural areas, imagining the future of rural areas as bleak but hoping for those to be more diversified and vibrant, both in terms of population and economic activities.

References

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⁴ Level 3 municipalities are the most 'rural'; municipalities with a population density between 100 and 500 inhabitants/km² with a total population under 25000 inhabitants, as well as municipalities with a population density below 100 inhabitants/km².

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