

Research Paper

# Promoting Cultural and natural heritage as key for planning wealthy and healthy territories

## Sicó Massif case

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### Abstract

*EU's development strategy integrates Economic, social and territorial cohesion. Besides, European Territorial Agenda and European Green Deal reinforce the need to rethink the territory's use and its resources. Moreover, the EU Urban Agenda argues that culture and heritage are key resources for resilient and sustainable development, including local culture, to enhance self-esteem and wealth. This understanding requires considering these key resources in territorial development strategies. However, the relationship between heritage and sustainable development remains a weak reality. Despite its rich cultural and natural heritage, Portugal's territory is marked by a densely populated coastline and an interior with a marked population loss. However, these neglected territories, can promote high health indicators and play a leading role in improving the quality of life. The Sicó Massif is one of these low-density areas, and despite its proximity to the sea and two district capitals, it cannot keep its inhabitants, much less attract new ones. We intend to analyze cultural and natural heritage's role in promoting territorial cohesion. From this background, we aim to define a new methodology based on endogenous values and resources, including communities, proposing a community-based approach and a co-designed development strategy for Sicó. In this framework, Academy can play a crucial role in reorientating local policies to adopt integrated approaches based on better territory knowledge to improve the quality of life and well-being and become more attractive to new activities and people.*

### Keywords

*Cultural Heritage, Natural resources, Low-density territories, Territorial Cohesion, Sustainable development*

## 1. Introduction

Most of Europe's population today lives in cities or so-called urban areas. However, in the recent covid-19 pandemic, we saw how many of these people had chosen rural areas to escape the densely populated urban environments, seeking the fresh air of the countryside. Favoured by remote work and against the need to be locked up at home, the search for healthier territory allowed several Europeans to enjoy a new way of life in direct contact with nature for a while. However, despite the advantages of life in direct contact with nature and healthier environments, these rural territories have been facing since the 1970s an intense abandonment of the population, the closure of services of general use, and significant challenges to maintaining the small remaining population. In the context of cohesion policy, the EU has



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defended the need to guarantee living conditions in each territory and each community. However, these are the most significant difficulties in these territories, given the lack of accessibility and general services.

Since the Treaty of Amsterdam (1997), territory and territorial cohesion have entered the European Union's development agenda, and territorial cohesion has emerged as a way of realising the priority of cohesion policy comprised of economic and social cohesion (Medeiros, 2012). In the following decade, the meaning given to the territory progressively gained importance, as demonstrated by the adoption of the Territorial Agenda of the European Union (2007), the Treaty of Lisbon (2007), the Green Paper on Territorial Cohesion (2008), the Barca Report (2009) and the European Strategy 2020, adopted in 2010. This strategy advocates territorial cohesion as one of the goals to boost the European economy. In 2012, territorial cohesion was incorporated into the Treaty on European Union alongside economic and social cohesion (art. 3).

We can say that territorial cohesion is related to a balance between regions and countries, including the most disadvantaged ones, through a territorially based policy, i.e., one that considers each territory's characteristics, diversity, and dynamics. According to Barca (2009), territorial-based policies require a policy shift to local-based approaches, which in turn require governance models that emphasise the principle of complementarity and the need to articulate all decision-making levels. In addition, local-based strategies call for the active participation of local agents in developing their territory.

The latest European Territorial Agenda: "A Future for all places", approved in December 2020, "provides an action-oriented framework to promote territorial cohesion in Europe". In other words, it seeks to promote "balanced and harmonious territorial development between and within countries, regions, cities and municipalities, as well as ensuring a future for all places and people in Europe, building on the diversity of places and subsidiarity" (Point 6). For this, the role of natural and cultural heritage is fundamental, as well as "local and regional development assets that offer unique opportunities for development and high-quality living environments". Besides, "Sustainable and effective use of resources" is essential to "promote local business opportunities and improve the living conditions of the communities"(Point 41).

However, rural territories have experienced years of loss and cannot recognise the opportunities in the distinctive factors they possess. Natural and cultural heritage, in most cases, is not easily identifiable as having exceptional value and is not easily recognised, much less as a potential for development. We often deal with intangible heritage, practices, and ways of life that create these territories' environments and cultural landscapes. Still, the communities themselves do not recognise it as heritage. This is largely due to an orthodox view of heritage as something which needs the identification and listing of experts. Furthermore, the natural resources that generate the environment of these areas lack an understanding as potential drivers of development. Given this scenario, it is vital to understand how planning and land use planning can contribute to territorial cohesion and improve these communities' living conditions based on a strategy that promotes both the sustainable use of natural resources and cultural heritage.

Starting from analysing a low-density territory in the centre of Portugal, the Massif of Sicó, this Article is structured into 3 parts. The first will explore how heritage can be a driving force for development. Then it will focus on the case of the Massif of Sicó, analysing its distinctive characteristics and their potential to contribute to the well-being and health of the region. Then it analyses some policies conducted in Sicó, focusing on the role that heritage and natural resources have assumed in these policies. Finally, a set of recommendations is presented for designing policies to reinforce this region's territorial cohesion and thus promote improved quality of life, health, and wealth for those who live here.

## 2. Heritage as a key to a healthy, wealthy, and sustainable territory

In recent years we have witnessed a change in the perception of the concept of heritage, going from a static vision very much associated with an immovable good and with distinctive features that made it an exceptional piece in artistic or memorial value and that should be preserved, for the recognition that heritage is a social and political construct that needs a community to identify and recognise its cultural significance (Labadi and Logan 2015). On the other hand, it is the recognition of material and immaterial goods as heritage that grants them value and establishes a relationship among all those who recognise this value, creating a collective recognition associated with the identity of communities.

The Convention for the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity (2003), in Article 2, defines intangible cultural heritage as "those practices, representations, expressions, knowledge and skills - as well as the instruments, objects, artefacts and cultural spaces associated with them - which communities, groups and, when applicable, individuals recognise as forming an integral part of their cultural heritage. This intangible cultural heritage, transmitted down from generation to generation, is constantly recreated by communities and groups according to their environment, their interaction with nature and their history, and provides them a sense of identity and continuity, thus promoting respect of cultural diversity and human creativity". In its turn, the Framework Convention of the Council of Europe on the value of cultural heritage for society (Council of Europe, 2005) underlines the potential of heritage "as a source of sustainable development and quality of life in a society". Also, it stresses the need to adopt measures that consider the "role of cultural heritage in the building of a peaceful and democratic society, as well as in the process of sustainable development" through "a greater synergy of competence among all the public, institutional and private actors involved" (Article 1).

The emphasis on the involvement of communities and all public and private agents should be highlighted; however, while recognising the importance of cultural heritage for the quality of life and establishing the need for measures for sustainable development, it does not explicitly state what these measures should be. These are under the responsibility of each State, which is responsible for applying the convention to a specific territory. In other words, the practical application of the convention in terms of area and form is the responsibility of the various governments and territorial management entities.

However, some case studies confirm how heritage, when well-managed, can improve social inclusion and intercultural dialogue, promote tourism, create jobs, and contribute to community development (UNESCO, 2016; Dümcke and Gnedovsky, 2013; Pickard, 2015). Local culture needs to be seen as a resource and a development potential that can be a competitive advantage (Santinha, 2014). In other words, cultural heritage should be understood as a territorial capital with development potential due to its distinguishing factor and capacity to provide well-being for those who live there and those who visit (Hribar, Bole and Pipan, 2015).

On the other hand, quality of life is also a vast concept, not limited to the existence of an environment with which the community identifies and where it shares specific values. It also presupposes the notion of well-being and stresses the importance of the quality of the environment, implying physical conditions related to comfort and salubrity, as well as social and economic conditions which impact the health and well-being of individuals (Barton and Grant, 2011).

The effect of place on health is an important strand of both conceptualisation and policy development (Macintyre, Ellaway and Cummins, 2002) and the environment is recognised as a key determinant of health (Marmot and Wilkinson, 1999). The covid-19 pandemic and the challenges posed by climate change reinforced the need to refocus urban and territorial planning to contribute to a healthier territory that intentionally promotes well-being. Thus, it is necessary to think about the environmental conditions for man and the natural balance, to think about ecosystems and human well-being in an articulated and

integrated way, valuing ecosystem services and their contribution to well-being and health through urban and territorial planning. Natural resources and the natural environment are the main assets for well-being in rural areas. However, despite these advantages, these low-density areas have a higher rate of ageing, less access to health care and a lower average income of the population (Azul et al, 2021). It is therefore fundamental to have an integrated planning policy that overcomes these weaknesses and guarantees the fulfilment of all the needs, territorial planning is a “critical enabler for health and well-being” in places, since “health can be influenced by many factors beyond the health sector” (UN-Habitat and WHO, 2020).



Figure 1. Sicó Region location. Source: Basemap provided by Google Maps online

### 3. Sicó Massif, attributes, values, and policies

The Massif of Sicó is a small Massif, with about 430 Km<sup>2</sup>, located in the western Mesocenoic Rim, a little south of the city of Coimbra (Cunha, 1990) and crosses six municipalities: Alvaizere, Ansião, Soure, Pombal, Penela and Condeixa-a-Nova.

Due to the rough characteristics of the soil, this area presents difficult conditions for population settlement because of the scarcity of water on the surface and the stony soils. However, it is located close to the Portuguese coast and close to two cities of significant importance, Coimbra and Leiria. Today it is a low-density territory with densities of less than 50 inhabitants per km<sup>2</sup> (Cunha, 2003) and faces abandonment and an ageing population. Of the six municipality seats, only Pombal is a city, all the others being villages. It is thus a territory marked by small villages whose population is mostly no longer dedicated exclusively to agriculture but works in the larger agglomerations. It is also in these agglomerations that are located most of the facilities such as schools, health centres and shops. However,

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although these urban centres and rural agglomerations are connected by good car accessibility, public transport is scarce and practically limited to school transport.

However, despite the adverse soil conditions, the Massif of Sicó has a rich natural heritage, including geological phenomena common to karst areas and biodiversity, which justifies the inclusion in the Natura Network: Sicó/Alvaiázere. (Natura 2000 Network Site-PTCON0045 [https://www.ccdrc.pt/index.php?option=com\\_docman&view=download&id=637&Itemid=739](https://www.ccdrc.pt/index.php?option=com_docman&view=download&id=637&Itemid=739)). Besides, it is also ongoing the classification as Regional Protected Landscape.



Figure 2. Buracas dos Casmilo. Source: Margarida Calmeiro.

The cultural heritage identified includes a rich set of remains from the Bronze Age, Romans and medieval times. The Roman remains stand out, with emphasis on Conimbriga, the Roman Villa of Rabaçal, the Ruins of São Simão (Penela), the Monumental Complex of Santiago da Guarda (Ansião), the aqueduct of Conimbriga and the Castellum of Alcabideque (Condeixa); the Castle of Soure; the Rominha (Alvaiázere) and the Roman ruins of Telhada (Pombal). The Walls and fortresses also stand out: the Monumental Complex of Santiago da Guarda (Ansião), the Castle of Penela, the Castle of Germanelo (Penela), the Castle of Pombal, the Paço da Ega (Condeixa-a-Nova) and the Castle of Soure). All are part of the network of walls and fortresses of the Mondego.

In addition to the built and monumental heritage, there is also a rich heritage associated with rural activities, such as a set of practices and traditions related to olive oil and wine production, the production of pigs, the shepherding of goats and sheep, cheese production and the production of honey, corn and linen and subsequent weaving, besides a set of festivities related to agricultural practices and religious celebrations.

However, despite the forces of the Massif of Sicó, this region has witnessed the continuous abandonment of the population since the 1970s. This migration is related to the search for better living conditions due to the lack of employment in the region. Thus, between 2001 and 2020, the region lost 12846 inhabitants (<https://www.pordata.pt>). The loss of population is, however, transversal to a large percentage of the country, classified as interior and very marked by rural communities. To deal with this situation, national policies and programs financed by the EU have been implemented through the Cohesion Fund or Regional Operational Programmes. Among these programmes stand out LEADER, a local based development programme: Linking Rural Economy Development Actions, which results from a community

initiative for rural development through a bottom-up method instead of the traditional top-down application. Based on the new understanding that local development must start from the communities, this programme supports integrated initiatives designed and implemented at the local level (Thirion and Cavaco, 2003). The programme has defined various axes of action related to rural territories, such as creating employment and innovation and using rural areas for tourism. To apply for this funding, territories must be organised in "Local Action Groups (LAGs), which public-private partnerships can constitute.

In the Sicó region, belonging to 6 different municipalities with similar natural and cultural characteristics, it was founded in 1988 the Associação de Municípios da Serra de Sicó - ADSicó which was converted in 1995 in the Terras de Sicó, Associação de Desenvolvimento. This association aims to promote the development of the municipalities within its area of competence through promoting initiatives and support projects in close collaboration with local, regional, national, and international entities (<http://www.terrasdesico.pt/>), acting on four axes (Valorisation of endogenous products; territory as a tourist destination; qualification of human resources and innovation; territorial and transnational cooperation).

Since 2014, the association has formed a LAG (Local Action Group) as part of the Local Community-Based Development programme, for which the association has defined a local development strategy. It has therefore been a fundamental agent for the development of this region (Jerónimo, 2015).

In addition, it has had a direct action to help local entrepreneurs, to promote and publicise the brand "Terras de Sicó", and define Products with a protected designation of origin (PDO), such as cheese, wine and olive oil. It has developed some actions more related to the planning and management of the territory. These include the ongoing delimitation of the Regional Protected Landscape Area, the creation of a Network of Limestone Villages and the process for inscribing the Dry-stone Walls in the UNESCO World Heritage List.

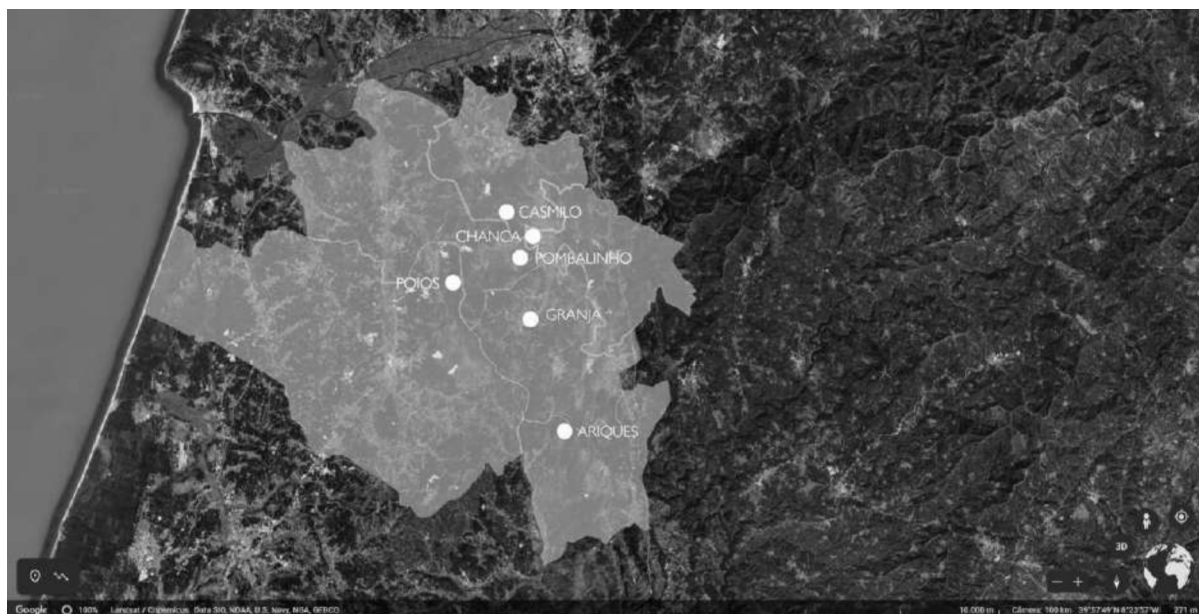


Figure 3. Network of Limestone Villages, 1<sup>st</sup> phase. Source: basemap provided by google.earth.



Figure 4. Threshing houses and the circular stone threshing floor. Source: Adelino Gonçalves.



Figure 5. Limestone house. Source: Adelino Gonçalves.

This last process aims to work together with other international applications and it is starting and does not have any kind of result yet. The delimitation of the Regional Protected Landscape Area is at the final stage. After the first phase of public consultation, it is being revised to be subjected once again to public consultation since there has been a change in the area's boundaries. It is desirable to be able to consult all the inhabitants of the area included in the delimitation. A management plan will then be drawn up and the main purpose is to enhance the cultural and natural landscape and protect its biodiversity, guaranteeing its integrated management, since it integrates areas from six different municipalities. The network of villages intends to value and protect a set of villages that witness how man has transformed this territory and aims to promote tourism. They comprise a group of six villages in the first phase

(Ariques, Casmilo, Chanca, Granja, Pombalinho, Poios) and six more villages in the second phase (Aldeia do Ferrarias, Aldeia do Vale, Cotas, Aljazedo, Marques, Poço). They are villages characterised not only by the vernacular architecture in limestone, marked by the building system of stone and wood, but also strongly influenced by local livelihoods that require, for example, the existence of cisterns in all the buildings, since this is an area where there is no surface water. There is also a set of agricultural support equipment, such as the threshing houses and the circular stone threshing floors punctuating the fields. Also, concerning the appropriation of the fields for agriculture, the dry-stone walls and some shepherds' shelters built with the many stones that mark these fields stand out. The first six villages were the target of detailed works for the development of a rehabilitation strategy, framed in the Portuguese Legal Regime of Urban Rehabilitation (RJRU) which foresees the delimitation of an Urban Rehabilitation Area (ARU) and the definition of a strategy to operationalise an Urban Rehabilitation Operation (ORU). In the case of the limestone villages, the delimited areas have already been defined, and the ORU development is in its final phase. This ORU will be implemented through a Strategic Rehabilitation Programme (PERU) that defines a new vision for the six villages. The aim is to enhance the value of the villages through rehabilitating the built environment and urban space and promoting revitalisation through the economic enhancement of unique resources. The results can only be evaluated after the implementation of these projects. Still, from this example, it is possible to learn some lessons from the processes and expected results.

#### 4. Lessons and recommendations for planning a wealthy and healthy territory

These three initiatives place the cultural and natural heritage at the centre of development. The innovation lies in combining the three projects under an understanding of the Massif of Sicó as a cultural landscape and integrating the small rural villages.

The strategy for the limestone villages network followed examples of other networks, some of them old and with results that have been discussed and published, namely the network of Historical Villages of Portugal and the network of Schist Villages, the two best-known cases in Portugal (Carvalho, 2009; Martinez-Roget et al., 2015; Boura, 2014; Reis, 2019). Both cases benefited from support from EU funds. The motto was the promotion of tourism and, associated with this promotion, the revitalization of the villages. We can say that in most villages, success depended on the degree of abandonment that existed in the villages, on their remaining human capital and, in some cases, on the existence of some distinctive attributes. But it won't be easy to list the success factors of each of these networks since the specific contexts were decisive for the results. The case of the village of Ferraria de São João (<https://www.aldeiasdoxisto.pt/pt/quem-somos/directorio/associacao-de-moradores-da-ferraria-de-sao-joao/>), being part of Penela, one of the municipalities that integrates the Massif of Sicó, may have been an engine and an example for the creation of the network of limestone villages. However, the method adopted was not the same.

The need to develop the process more quickly so that it could enjoy the benefits granted to the Urban Rehabilitation Areas approved by the IHRU led to the identification of villages and the delimitation of the ARUs without the active involvement of the communities. The rehabilitation strategy for the network of limestone villages began with information sessions for the communities, with the presentation and public discussion of the proposals, but not with the effective involvement of the communities in the definition and cocreation of these proposals. In some villages, the lack of participation was justified by the almost non-existence of inhabitants, such as Ariques and Granja, and by the fear of contagion of the elderly and vulnerable population in the context of the SARS-COV 2 pandemic. Despite this, the contact with communities took place through local associations and parish councils, with public consultations carried



out within the scope of the delimitation of the Regional Protected Landscape Area and through the academic work developed by the students of the Department of Architecture of the University of Coimbra. They have been working in these villages since the 2020/2021 school year.

In the second case, before the beginning of the academic work, study camps were held in the Massif de Sicó for a week, and there was the opportunity to meet with the community and representatives of local associations and local stakeholders. Throughout the process, some of the developed work was presented, and some students managed to maintain an interaction with the local communities and based their proposals on these interactions. In other cases, namely in villages with less population, this interaction was more difficult.



Figure 6. Dry-stone walls. Source: Adelino Gonçalves.



Figure 7. Students interacting with a Chanca's resident. Source: Adelino Gonçalves.

The process that has now begun for the inscription of dry-stone walls on the UNESCO Heritage list, having overcome the limitations of the pandemic crisis, will adopt another method, and will be developed with the direct involvement of communities. The objective, more than the nomination itself, is to create an integrated approach that involves the communities and all ongoing projects and promotes the safeguarding and development of the heritage of Sicó to benefit local communities. It is expected that

the involvement of people in the process, makes them feel a shared responsibility, promotes a sense of belonging and reinforces self-esteem and fulfils the community's needs. In addition, with the support of Terras de Sicó, the Municipalities and the Academy, it is expected to promote the creation of businesses and initiatives that allow the development of the local economy, guaranteeing employment and the establishment of the population.

This support can be financial or non-financial, with tax exemptions and support funds, for rehabilitation and for the creation of jobs and businesses. However, it will fundamentally have to be technical support and training. The valorisation and dissemination of local knowledge must be reinforced. One of the measures already foreseen is the creation of training schools associated with local knowledge and practices, related with the most significant agricultural production in the area, such as cheese, wine, olive oil and honey, and for the constructive knowledge of vernacular construction, namely of dry-stone walls and vernacular architecture.

For this development strategy to be based on natural heritage and culture, a territorially based policy will be needed (Santinha, 2014; Barca, 2009) and must rely on external interventions and multilevel governance. Community-based and differentiated tourism can be an excellent contribution to the revitalization of this region; however, it will have to be regulated and should take advantage of the different factors of the region in harmony and articulation with the local communities (Natário et al., 2019, Brito, 2011). The exchange and dissemination of agricultural practices will allow for this interaction.

The strategy in progress, proposes a heritage-based approach enhancing its natural and cultural resources. The examples of other cases and the work developed over the last few years have trained the Terras de Sicó and the municipalities primarily responsible for launching these strategies. The various meetings and discussions between local agents and communities, with the collaboration of the Academy, allowed the exchange of experiences, visions and knowledge. International documents and directives clarify what needs to be done, and national policies designed based on the National Programme for Spatial Planning Policy (PNPOT) and European policies create the mechanisms and instruments that foster the operationalization of the strategy. There is still a long way to go, but we can state that what is being built on this path is already contributing to constructing a wealthier and healthier territory.

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