



PREPARING REGIONS FOR DEMOGRAPHIC CHANGE

Delivering Quality Services to All: Alentejo region case study

Launching/Final event – Virtual
Tuesday 15 March, 15:30 – 17:15 CET

[Agenda](#)

SUMMARY

Setting the context

In the framework of the OECD workstream *Preparing Regions for Demographic Change*, the project *Delivering Quality Services to All: Alentejo region case study* aims to provide the Portuguese region of Alentejo with a case study on the provision of education services in rural areas and related sectoral and regional development policies to inform regional development strategies. The study focuses on two main policy areas: multi-level governance arrangement and forward-looking planning for the provision of education services.

Summary record

1. The event took place on 15 March 2022 at 15:30 CET and was attended by over 140 people. It brought to an end the OECD project *Delivering Quality Services to All: Alentejo region case study*. Moderated by Jose Enrique Garcilazo (Deputy Head of the Regional Development and Multi-level Governance Division at the OECD Centre for Entrepreneurship, SMEs, Regions and Cities), the event discussed rural depopulation challenges and brought together policy makers from Portugal and other OECD regions, as well as international experts, to share experiences of best practices in managing demographic change in rural areas. Agenda is available [here](#). The Policy Highlights of the case study are available in [English](#) and [Portuguese](#).
2. The event started with welcome high-level remarks by Dorothée Allain-Dupré (Head of the Regional Development and Multi-level Governance Division at the OECD Centre for Entrepreneurship, SMEs, Regions and Cities), Carmen Carvalheira (Vice-President of the Alentejo Regional Coordination and Development Commission – CCDDR-A), and Duarte Rodrigues (Vice-President of the Portuguese Agency for Development and Cohesion –

AD&C), who welcomed the positive results of this project, the cooperation between the OECD and Portugal, and the importance of addressing the challenge of rural depopulation from their organisations' perspective.

3. The OECD Centre for Entrepreneurship, SMEs, Regions and Cities presented the project's case study starting by reminding the project's timeline and by presenting Alentejo's main demographic and digital trends.

A. On multi-level governance and finance, Isidora Zapata (Policy Analyst in the Decentralisation, Subnational Finance and Infrastructure Unit) presented three main recommendations:

- First, the need of pursuing decentralisation and regionalisation reforms. Indeed, decentralisation – and in particular regionalisation – can be a tool that, while bringing decision-making closer to citizens, will allow, among other things, better aligning service provision and local needs;
- Second, further strengthening inter-municipal cooperation is key avenue to provide services at the right scale and, with this, improve service planning and provision in education, health care and social support;
- Third, Portugal needs to adjust fiscal arrangements to ensure municipalities can properly finance service provision and adapt to demographic trends. Isidora mentioned concrete proposals in this perspective.

B. On forward-looking planning for the provision of education services, Marc Bournisien de Valmont (Policy Analyst in the Regional and Rural Policy Unit) emphasized four main points:

- First, it is necessary to better understand and integrate demographic changes and their impact in our strategy. It means in particular that we need to design tailored strategies for small rural municipalities and lagging regions in order to bridge the quality and access gaps in education and improve the restructuring and planning of the school network,
- Second, achieving better quality education also requires improving the geographic mobility of teachers while increasing within school efficiency. The report made also some concrete suggestions in that direction;
- Third, increased efforts are needed to bridge the digital divide and enhance the digitalisation of public services. Digitalisation will be crucial to tackle the challenge of school transportation and digital skills gaps in rural areas.
- Finally, a strategy for student accommodation could also contribute to solve the challenges of school transport.

4. In addition to the OECD case study, we had the pleasure to listen two international experts from Spain and Finland that brought the views from their countries. Paz Díaz Nieto (Director General of European Funds in the Regional Ministry of Economy and Finance of the Government of Cantabria in Spain) discussed on how the regional management of EU funds addresses challenges such as depopulation, population ageing and the lack of opportunities. She also mentioned the importance of social innovation and human factors, as well as the need to build ecosystems for entrepreneurship or to foster cooperation between regions. The testimony of Mari Sjöström (Senior Adviser in education in the Association of Finnish Local and Regional Authorities – AFLRA) on how Finnish municipalities manage the primary education service throughout the country was also particularly instructive. Mari mentioned the

current regionalisation reform in Finland, the role of municipalities, and the need to develop distance learning and long-term cooperation among the different actors.

5. We also had the opportunity to hear from our invited expert Steve Wright (Principal Researcher in Vectos/SLR in the UK), who contributed in the very interesting International Transport Forum (ITF) [report](#) “Innovations for Better Rural Mobility”, on how providing services that meet the education transport needs. Steve talked about the reorganisation of transport services, the decentralisation of responsibilities and budget, and the need for better coordination among Portuguese and Alentejo stakeholders.

6. The event also counted with participation from Portuguese and Alentejo actors at the national, regional and local levels: Pedro Abrantes (Deputy Director-General at the Directorate-General for Education and Science Statistics of the Portuguese Ministry for Education), Tânia Mourato (Director of the Department for Cooperation and Financial Affairs at the Directorate General of Local Authorities – DGAL), Nuno Oliveira Romão (Coordinator at the Agency for Development and Cohesion – AD&C), Joaquim Fialho (Director of Regional Development Services at the Alentejo Regional Coordination and Development Commission – CCDR-A), Fernando Romba (First Secretary at the Intermunicipal Community of Baixo Alentejo – CIMBAL), and Sónia Andrade (Director of the Redondo School Group in Alentejo Central). Each shared their views on the case study and the different recommendations on the long-term planning of education provision, including the need of data, information, capacity-building and leadership, the benefits of digitalisation, school transport or how to retain teachers through better transport, digital accessibility, housing and cooperative networks, as well as on multi-level governance for placed-based policies and regional development, including the role of regional coordination or the challenge of inter-municipal cooperation.

7. Finally, Isabelle Chatry (Head of the Decentralisation, Subnational Finance and Infrastructure Unit at the OECD Centre for Entrepreneurship, SMEs, Regions and Cities) summarised the event’s main messages and thanked in particular all the Portuguese stakeholders who participated in the project, from contributing to the survey to participating in the study mission, as well as the project’s counterparts in Portugal, including CCDR-A (the vice-president Carmen Carvalheira and Joaquim Fialho, who participated in the event, but also Teresa Godinho and Carla Lázaro), and the AD&C (in particular his vice-president Duarte Rodrigues, Nuno Oliveira Romão, Inacio Rui, and Catarina Portela). Isabelle also thanked the invited international experts, the interpreters, as well as the OECD team, in particular to Marc Bournisien de Valmont, Isidora Zapata, Ana Moreno Monroy, and Enrique Garcilazo.