



Territorial Governance: The Melides Experience

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Introduction

This paper refers to an experience in territorial governance implemented in Melides (Alentejo Region, Portugal) in the context of WETNET, a project financed by the INTERREG MED programme (2017-2019). The project addressed the sustainability of the Melides wetland, aiming to recover the ecosystem of the lagoon and surrounding area, to promote sustainable development based on tourism and rice farming, the main economic activities in the area.

A governance process was carried out, engaging local stakeholders and public authorities, to define interventions and good practices to ensure the lagoon sustainability. The process culminated with a stakeholders' agreement to implement an action plan grounded on a shared vision for the area.

The approach was based on the concept of territorial/multi-level governance with a focus on the shared management of a vulnerable area. Assessment of the collaborative process that was implemented locally, highlighted some difficulties and challenges faced in this type of approaches and provided lessons that can be useful to address similar situations.

Territorial Governance

The concept of territorial governance was introduced in the European regional policy by the European Commission (EU), becoming a central element in policymaking processes. Stemming from an early definition by OECD¹, the notion of territorial governance was later developed in the "Green Paper on Territorial Cohesion" elaborated by the European Commission² and in the so-called Barca Report³, which associates the concept to a place-based approach to development policies. In this sense, territorial governance relates to a policymaking process that is adaptive to changing (territorial) contexts and considers place-based and territorial specificities and impacts.

The Barca Report opened the debate for the adoption of the concept of territorial governance in the EU cohesion policy period 2014 to 2020. The importance of territorial governance was further enhanced in the Territorial Agenda of the European Union 2020 and in the Network of Territorial Cohesion Contact Points report⁴. These documents call for a "*place-based, territorially sensitive and integrated approach to policies, to improve the performance of actions on all levels and create synergies between different types of policy interventions*"⁵.

The 2018 EU Conference on "Good Governance for Cohesion Policy" issued some recommendations for the adoption of territorial governance as a principle in the

¹ OECD (2001)

² CEC (2008)

³ Barca (2009)

⁴ NTCCP (2013)

⁵ Well, L. v., & Schmitt, P. (2015)



implementation of EU funded projects⁶. The importance of stakeholder and citizens engagement became more and more explicit. DG REGIO is currently launching a series of four virtual events (February and March 2022) in cooperation with several international partners under the joint heading 'Good governance for EU regional policy'. The final event that will take place on 10 March is dedicated to strengthening citizen engagement in cohesion policy.

The ESPON TANGO project⁷ conceptualizes territorial governance along five dimensions:

1. Coordinating actions of actors and institutions,
2. Integrating policy sectors,
3. Mobilising stakeholder participation,
4. Being adaptive to changing contexts,
5. Realising place-based/territorial specificities and impacts.

Territorial governance is complementary to multilevel governance as it focuses on the mobilization of regional/local actor groups and the integration of indigenous knowledge into policymaking processes. Governance is both a system and process. It is a powerful tool for territorial development processes, as the Narrative of the high-level conference "Engaging Citizens for Good Governance in Cohesion Policy" states:

- ✓ *"It ensures that expertise and technical know-how is considered during decision-making processes, enabling better thematic balance and focus;*
- ✓ *It strengthens commitment and ownership of policy decisions at local level and thus facilitate implementation;*
- ✓ *It deepens complementarities with other policies, strategies and funding sources"*⁸.

The Melides Experience

The Melides Lagoon is part of a Mediterranean-type coastal lagoon system extending along the Alentejo coast in Portugal, about 20 km west of Grândola and 20 km north of Sines, located in the municipality of Grândola. It is protected under the Nature 2000 Network, included in the Comporta/Galé site of community importance (PTCON0034 - Comporta/Galé). Like most Mediterranean coastal land-locked lagoons its sustainability depends on reducing human pressures on the ecosystems and coping with unfavourable effects of climate and water dynamics.

The concern with the sustainability of the lagoon ecosystem provided the rationale to establish a "wetland contract" on the Melides Lagoon⁹, in the context of the INTERREG MED funded WETNET Project. Inspired in the River Contracts¹⁰ adopted in several European countries for collective water management, the wetland contract should bring together all stakeholders

⁶ https://ec.europa.eu/regional_policy/en/conferences/good_governance/

⁷ Territorial Approaches for New Governance, see ESPON and NORDREGIO (2013a), (2013b), ESPON and POLITECNICO DI TORINO (2013)

⁸ Narrative of the high-level conference "Engaging Citizens for Good Governance in Cohesion Policy". https://ec.europa.eu/regional_policy/sources/conferences/citizens_good_governance/narrative.pdf

⁹ WETNET (2019)

¹⁰ <http://www.ideassonline.org/public/pdf/ContrattoFiume-ENG.pdf>



under a common purpose: to recover the Lagoon, promote ecological equilibrium and boost the potential for supporting economic activities.

The approach to the development of the wetland contract was highly participated. The starting point was the stakeholder mapping, and a series of interviews to understand the different points of view and interests. The interviews revealed explicit and potential conflicts of land and water use, with stakeholders reciprocally blaming one another for the threats to the lagoon ecosystem.

Stakeholders included the rice farmers, not organised in any collective structure and competing among them, the tourism operators, a large camping site, some cultural and environmental local organisations, and the whole range of public authorities operating in different sectors (environment, agriculture, tourism, and land use administration) and at various administrative levels (local, municipal, and regional). Some residents and local investors, particularly in the holidays residential sector, were also in the group.

The project organised the so-called General Assemblies of Stakeholders (group meetings with all stakeholders involved) and started working to converge on the identification of problems and possible solutions. Over almost two years of meetings, consensus were gradually reached. First, stakeholders had to agree on the causes of the problems and on the values to be restored. Then, an action plan was prepared with the participation of all, defining actions and responsibilities for each stakeholder group.

Every general assembly meeting was preceded by preparatory individual meetings with the stakeholders directly related to the problem under discussion. This reduced substantially the level of conflict in the general meetings. In addition, scientific evidence and qualified experts were brought into the debate to promote objective reasoning.

Territorial labs were organised targeting the wetland critical issues, according to following categories: sanitation, agriculture, tourism, fishing, lagoon and river environment, and governance issues. In each category, a set of interventions was identified and discussed, first with the relevant stakeholders, and later in a general assembly with all stakeholders. In the process, additional measures were added to the interventions list, some were adjusted, and others eliminated. A special concern of the project team was to assess and understand the technical feasibility of each intervention. This was done through expert consultation, namely university and research units.

One of the most important findings in the process was that rice farming had a lesser than expected negative effect on the water quality of the Lagoon. Production methods used by farmers already minimise impacts and change to organic production, for instance, can only be envisaged in a new framework of financial incentives.

Wastewater discharges were found to be the major pressure on the wetland ecological system. This required a solution based on hard infrastructure, which should be prepared by the Municipal Services in cooperation with the regional public bodies and key private stakeholders.

Tourism upgrading was another consensual need, and several measures were discussed in this context.

Interventions in the water body and river environment have an important technical/scientific component. For this reason, local stakeholders didn't react much to the interventions proposed



by the project team. The most critical issues regarding the measures discussed were related to land ownership and financial resources.

Finally, governance issues were also discussed, and some measures were accepted, concerning local stakeholders' empowerment to monitor the wetland and to supervise the implementation of the action plan, as well as the intention to join efforts for the development of the most important activities: agriculture and tourism.

The most critical challenges faced in this process were:

- To make sure that project goals match the real problems as perceived by the stakeholders. This requires a relevance assessment of the problems mentioned by the stakeholders and the adjustment of the project objectives.
- To convince stakeholders of the usefulness of their own participation. Often, stakeholders are demotivated, considering that nobody cares about their opinion, especially the policymakers. The presence of key elements of the local authorities in the group meeting is very important to motivate stakeholders.
- To manage conflicts between stakeholders, promote dialogue and co-operation. This is the most difficult task, and some "tricks" may be necessary, such as individual meetings. The key is to make one understand the other's perspective.
- To adapt to the timing and availability of the stakeholders. This requires patience and determination, meaning that the project timings must be flexible.

The collaborative process produced two levels of results: the project products and some intangible achievements. The project main outputs are:

- The Local Action Plan, based on a shared vision for the wetland area, and defining operational goals to improve and preserve the quality of the Lagoon; the plan allocates responsibilities among the stakeholders for the implementation of 18 measures covering environmental protection, economic development, and governance.
- The Melides Lagoon Wetland Agreement, subscribed by 17 stakeholders (public and private) that agree to develop their best efforts to implement the Action Plan.
- The Local Governance Structure, included in the Wetland Agreement as the management structure for the implementation of the Action Plan. The structure follows the model adopted during the collaborative process, which was considered quite successful by most stakeholders.

As regards intangible achievements and successes, the process contributed to:

- Increased awareness of local stakeholders about the fragility of the wetland system and the pressures on the ecosystems.
- Empowerment of the local stakeholders to watch and preserve the quality of the wetland, assuming responsibility for improving their practices.
- Improved dialogue between the different stakeholder groups, that started to show more respect and understanding by the difficulties of the others.



- Increased awareness of the decision makers, particularly the municipal authorities, about the importance and effectiveness of the territorial governance process.

Conclusions and Recommendations

The collaborative process adopted in the WETNET project for the restoration and preservation of the Melides Lagoon ecosystem involved participants from 15 to 20 organisations from the public administration and the private sector. The process was based on five group meetings (general assemblies of stakeholders) and many sectoral and individual meetings. Territorial labs oriented to the wetland critical issues allowed for the selection of the interventions included in a shared Action Plan. The key facilitator was a project staff member, with previous experience in governance, local development, and territorial planning.

Complementary sectoral and individual meetings were determinant to prepare inputs for the general assemblies and to assess the position of key stakeholders, helping to reinforce the role of the facilitator and to reduce tensions during the group meetings. General assemblies were focused on sharing information on critical issues of the pilot area, discussing options and getting consensus about solutions. Confrontation and conflict amongst stakeholders were moderate.

Implementation of the Action Plan with the involvement of key stakeholders was the focus of the Stakeholders' Agreement that took the form of a wetland contract signed by 17 entities. For the community involved, the contract represents a governance tool to achieve the common purpose of the Action Plan and the shared vision defined for the wetland.

Evidence on the success of the adopted approach is given by the fact that the governance structure approved for implementation of the Action Plan replicates the governance structure created during the project, demonstrating the stakeholders' satisfaction.

The process was carefully developed with full respect for the different interests in presence, seeking to include all stakeholders and mobilising them on an almost personal basis. Along the process, some critical factors for the success of the collaborative approach and the results reached were identified:

- Adopting a mixed approach based on general/sectoral/individual meetings, allowed for more proximity to stakeholders, particularly to deal with the most difficult ones. Careful preparation of group meetings to reduce tensions and facilitate consensus is recommended, including individual or bilateral meetings.
- Inputs for the meetings were always previously sent. Inputs such as information on talking points or the documents under appraisal (e.g., scenarios assessment, list of proposed interventions, action plan, draft agreement) were always sent to the participants prior to the meeting, and individual meetings for clarification were held whenever necessary.
- Keeping a frequent presence in the area. The facilitator or process manager should show up frequently and talk to local actors, show interest in the community activities and aspirations, as it helps to build the idea that he/she is genuinely involved and is "one of us".



- Maintaining a reasonable rhythm in the process: not letting too much time in between meetings, keeping in touch frequently (e-mail or telephone) with stakeholders, is important to maintain the collaboration dynamics.
- Showing results along the process. Presenting advances from one meeting to the next helped the stakeholders to create the idea of achievement and “getting somewhere” and keeping them motivated.
- Inviting “neutral” experts to present the technical vision of the most controversial issues. Supporting the discussion with scientific or technical arguments presented by neutral experts (academic, legal, etc.) introduces a new dimension in the debate and eases the pressure on the facilitator.

Successful implementation of processes based on the preservation and valorisation of natural heritage undoubtedly requires the involvement of local stakeholders. Territorial governance provides the approach and can ensure good results. However, it is a challenging process that must be addressed with full respect for the different perspectives and interests of the stakeholders.

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