

Portugal: a bet on the new rural realities (ruralities) – the Educational and Environmental Farm of Santo André and da Sancha lakes

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In August 2000, the area that includes the Santo André and da Sancha lakes in the Alentejo littoral in Portugal was designated a nature reserve. Also included in the reserve were eight communities: Costa de Santo André; S Bartolomeu da Serra; S Francisco da Serra; Santa Cruz; Roncão; Cruz de Loão Mendes; Brescos; and Aldeia de Santo André. Given its heritage and its scientific importance, the reserve could naturally be

regarded as a cultural, economic and social asset that would improve and promote the locality.

Adapting process and context to development

In the early 1990s, an initiative of the Instituto das Comunidades Educativas (Institute of Educational Communities), via its ‘Rural Schools’ project, swept through practically the whole of the Alentejo littoral, transforming and constructing a social dynamic focused on learning and development, and on breaking down isolation. Here, we consider what happened in the area that comes under the auspices of the District Council of Santiago do Cacém, and that includes the nature reserve around the Santo André and da Sancha lakes.

In this area, one outcome was the operation of so-called Different Days. A Different Day is an encounter between the children from a group of schools,

held in a community with the full participation of the members of that community. Children of all ages mix with community members of all ages, to learn together and enjoy a full and rich range of experiences.

Typically children work their way around the area, participating in a series of investigative activities that are set up and run by local people whose aim is to share their knowledge and skills. The outcomes of the children’s investigations are recorded in albums and in mini documentation centres so they can be consulted daily, and can be communicated to other classes during Intercultural Days, and to other pupils through the schools’ Children’s Workshop.

In the development of this process in Santiago do Cacém, the schools found themselves face to face with the limits of what they could do while the communities needed to create the dynamics that

would transform these initiatives into self-sustaining and permanent local processes. The way forward was a structure in which the partners in this initiative could move its centre of gravity from the initiative and the schools, into the communities – or rather into the social network through which the initiative operates.

To do this required the setting-up of a platform of all the relevant local organisations, that would reflect together on the development of Santiago do Cacém, and that would establish poly-centred initiatives that could become permanent foci of development. And one of these poles was the Educational and Environmental Farm of Santo André and da Sancha lakes.

A farm for a new rurality

The resultant Educational and Environmental Farm is a proposal for integrated development that is based in and on the nature reserve. It is feasible because it is co-owned by all relevant institutions: the Instituto das Comunidades Educativas, the Instituto da Conservação da Natureza (Institute of Nature Conservation), the Câmara Municipal de Santiago do Cacém (Municipal Council of Santiago do Cacém), and the Junta de Freguesia de Santo André (Parish Council of Santo André); and because its main objective is to ensure that the nature reserve remains a natural and social heritage.

Because of the secrets and knowledge that it guards in its breast, the reserve preserves the past uniquely and well. But above all – at least in our belief – it is also a reserve and resource for the future, something



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A Different Day – children learning in the community

that can reorientate the present of the people who live within it. This is the vision that informs our work and guides our investigations.

The idea is to invent a kind of educational territory into which knowledge gained from informal and formal education, and from life experiences can be integrated, a device that brings together components that until now have been disconnected: development; cultural identity; and knowledge of the natural and physical environment and all its inherent wealth.

The creation of infrastructures

To achieve this required a logistical infrastructure to support the project. In concrete form, this consists of the Welcome Centre in which visitors stay; the Experimental Centre; the House of Kneading and the Bread Oven; the Cowsheds and Stables; the Interpretation Centre, and the Wine Cellar.

Obviously a normal farm isn't made up of such elements, but then this Farm isn't intending to make

its living through normal commercial means. Instead it provides rural people with an integrated set of learning spaces in which to explore the story of agriculture. The point is to ensure that a visit isn't just a way of gathering knowledge and experiences, but that it also acts to strengthen rural self-esteem and to stimulate the revaluation by rural people of the knowledge that has been handed down to them.

Children as the subjects of development

At the Farm, a team of local teachers and technicians work with children in ways that transform them into people who help build the project. They are involved in decisions about the direction that the Reserve will go in; about the socio-cultural or recreational activities that are carried out; about the organisation of the spaces; and about the scientific research, in which they participate by observation and collecting data.

In their schools, sometimes accompanied by the technicians from the Farm, the children make use of what they saw and experienced at the Farm. Basic notions about zoology, botany and meteorology, or the Latin names of birds and plants, arise naturally through the learning by doing/discovery approach, and by exchanges between children. Here they talk among themselves about what they have seen, and through that, they learn to like it.

Some of their comments demonstrate how effective this approach is at a number of different levels.

- Scientific: *The ducks are very clever, they build their nests in the reeds so no one can see them or steal them.* (Ruben)

- Relational: *For me, the Farm is small but it has water, flowers, people, life, birds, herbs, sea, land, termites, and bees. Its the richest small farm I know.* (Francisco, 7 years)
- Affective: *The leaves of the sage bush are like the hands of my grandmother Arlete, very soft.* (Bernardo, 4 years)
- Social: *This weekend, I went to the pond with my father to 'research' crayfish.* (Carlos, 6 years)
- Citizenship: *For me, the Farm is like a magical garden with animals of the garden and creatures of the pond that want to live and not be destroyed.* (Ana, 6 years)

The children's enthusiasm is exceptional: they frequently talk about going 'to our Farm'. They are also building affective and cognitive links with the reserve and its flora, fauna, norms, ways, happenings and life and this is important in terms of its potential for the future. The children are builders of adult consciousness in these areas as well.

All of this takes place in a context of continuous contact between the children and the local communities and people, calling in to talk, be shown skills, share in knowledge and be given explanations about all sorts of unfamiliar matters – such as when and how to fish, when and how the fishing net is thrown, how to judge the freshness of a fish, how to milk livestock, how to sow seeds.

In this way, local people see themselves as wellsprings of knowledge about such things as the

secrets of nature as well as about social or collective activities such as fishing, the construction of boats, and so on.

In this process of child-mediated development, what stands out is that it bets on children being able to take on the responsibility and to share power. This is shown in the way in which they are able to collect and deliver the Christmas mail, then reinvest the profit from this in trees for the garden, in planting strawberries, in constructing screens for the garden, or in restocking areas of the reserve that are in poor condition. □