

S 11. – Left Behind Areas: Past, Present and Future

Left Behind Areas: Past, Present and Future of the municipality of Avis (Alentejo – Portugal)

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The issue of territorial asymmetries and cohesion has been the subject of multidisciplinary debate. In recent years, its inclusion in the public agenda has been reinforced, particularly with regard to the identification of factors that exclude territories from a perspective of valorization and sustainable development of these territories, marked in Portugal under different names, such as interior territories, low-density territories or peripheral territories, occupying around 60% of the country and which are generally characterized by depopulation, weak economic base, weak socio-cultural and institutional dynamics, but which include more or less significant potential, which makes it possible to implement initiatives business and social with favorable results for some segments of the population, which demonstrates some already detected capacity for resilience that persists in the territories in question, which in Portugal have not been attributed the designation of left behind.

Thus, case studies assume particular relevance as the one presented, as it constitutes an example for reflection on the issues under debate in Special Session nº 11.

For this purpose, the municipality of Avis was selected, located in the interior of Portugal, 160 km from Lisbon (equivalent to 2.00 hours by road). Since 1960, the year in which it reached 8,977 inhabitants, it has been losing population, which dropped to 3,812 inhabitants in 2021, less than half the value of the 1960s. One of the pieces of evidence along with others that will also be explained in the communication, that it is a municipality left behind (in the meaning adopted in the communication to be presented), but where initiatives are taking place that aim to counter the consequences of this adverse condition.

These initiatives have been implemented by business entrepreneurs (in the case of hotel, restaurant and local product manufacturing companies) and by social entrepreneurs (cooperatives, associations to support specific audiences), but also by local authorities, with emphasis on City Council (which launched and has been coordinating an integrated tourism project, which currently has the membership of 31 partner entities, 21 companies, 3 social economy organizations, 2 public administration organizations, 5 other types of organizations (where include the University, schools, regional and national organizations in the area of Tourism), that is, 23 local entities and 8 outside the municipality.

Taking into account several unfavorable indicators that characterize the aforementioned municipality (and others that are in similar conditions), and seeking to clarify the readers about the reality inherent to the selected territory and the context that influences it, as well as proposing explanations for the circumstances observed, This communication aims to achieve the following objectives: i) adapt a definition of areas left behind, applicable in this research, ii) explain where these areas are located in Portugal; iii) highlight the most significant data that make it possible to explain the current situation; iv) describe common characteristics that over several decades contribute to clarify the situation in which the aforementioned territories find themselves; v) mention strategies and measures implemented and those that must be reinforced in multilevel governance, to improve the unfavorable situation exposed; vi) present structuring initiatives, namely those based on the quintuple helix, implemented in the municipality to combat unfavorable consequences that affect the territory; vii) present and debate the scope of actions undertaken by citizens, motivated to fight for the development of their localities and, viii) outline medium-term perspectives for the municipality of Avis.

The option for this set of objectives can be considered relevant, as through a case study, it contributes to reinforcing knowledge about the issue of territories left behind, allowing comparisons to be made with other places and, consequently, through a reasoning exercise inductive, undertake some consistent generalizations regarding similarities and differences that make it possible to test medium-range theories (circumscribed or applied to a universe of specific cases and with different affinities).

To carry out the research, a quantitative-qualitative methodological approach was adopted, which included the following sequences: i) collection and reading of available information (qualitative and quantitative) selected according to the dimensions of analysis, ii) use of descriptive statistics applied to quantitative information and, categorical content analysis applied to qualitative information and, iii) ordering and discussion of the results obtained. With regard to the remaining identity traits, this is research: i) simultaneously descriptive, but also explanatory (in terms of objectives), ii) documentary (in terms of procedures), iii) basic (in terms of nature), iv) longitudinal (regarding development over time).

The methodological options and procedures described are explained in the essence of the previously established objectives, whether of a theoretical-conceptual, descriptive and factual, or explanatory nature, who are directing the collection of relevant information. The part of the exploratory documentary research that has been carried out so far has made it possible to infer that the concept left behind has not been accepted in Portugal, where three related concepts continue to be used, with no consensus on the relevance of one of them, the concept of interior territories (although used frequently, even by government officials and bodies), with the concept of low-density territories or even the concept of peripheral territories sometimes being used as an alternative. These territories in this country, reached their population peak at the end of the 50s of the 20th century (just after the end of the Second World War), when they began to lose population that emigrated to the Lisbon Metropolitan Area and abroad, due to demand for labor in the industrial belts and also due to the layoff of labor in the agricultural sector, particularly in Alentejo.

Significant population groups were thus compelled to leave their places of origin behind, which could be said to be being left behind in terms of employment opportunities and other living conditions, as there was no investment in the creation of productive units, that could retain a young population.

In the Alentejo songbook and in poems published in local media outlets or in other means of dissemination, testimonies about these migratory movements are expressed, which highlights the sorrow of those who moved on to other destinations, so that they would not feel as having remained behind where they were born and raised.

The territories abandoned by emigrants, justifiably as we understand it, became demographically weakened (as they no longer had many inhabitants), and also became more impoverished (as they lost part of their population with entrepreneurial skills). This population decline, and the territorial imbalances it caused, influenced the spatially asymmetric distribution of resources by public policies, and a lack of interest in investments by the business sector. In these circumstances, the creation of Social Economy organizations, or Third Sector, and the action of local authorities managed to ensure responses to various requests from inhabitants, especially the most vulnerable (elderly, people with disabilities, long-term unemployed, people in situations of severe poverty), which alleviated the feeling of being left behind.

It was also possible to verify that in many of the territories, the reduced opening hours of health services and the small number of professionals in these services persist, the scarce amount of public transport connecting to district capitals and other urban centers, the unsatisfactory roads of connection to the outside, the non-existence or insufficiency of responses in the pre-school and secondary education sector, situations that in turn generate a feeling of territories left behind.

The support made available by the European Union and the measures adopted at national level have not had the desired effects by the populations, often claimed by political leaders and other relevant actors, with regard to the deprivations mentioned above, in addition to the non-existent or minimal supply of jobs, even if they are poorly paid. The European Union, through regional territorial cohesion policies, operationalized by Community Support Frameworks, and national policies have proven to be ineffective. The National Program for Territorial Cohesion approved in 2016 and the creation of the Mission Unit for the Enhancement of the Interior are examples of national public policies aimed at this type of territories, the impacts of which have yet to be identified.

Therefore, the feeling of being left behind is closely associated with the lack of answers in health, employment, education, accessibility and travel to other locations. It appears, however, that alongside this feeling, a capacity for resilience and overcoming has emerged, led by local civil society actors and representatives of local authorities, which allows inhabitants to maintain identification with places and compliance with the existing situation, and even aroused the interest of outsiders who settle there or acquire second homes.

The expected results at the end of the research thus consist of: i) outlining a theoretical-conceptual framework and a contextual framework that make it possible to understand empirical results regarding the municipality of Avis, in particular, and territories with a similar path and characteristics (as areas geographic areas left behind) and, ii) highlight that in this municipality there are desires and resources (means) that made it possible to promote initiatives with favorable effects in sectors fundamental to local sustainability, iii) present three possible perspectives for the municipality of Avis in the 2030 horizon, and iv) leave a critical assessment of the results achieved for reflection.

Explanations for this set of expected results, particularly those that quantitatively and qualitatively reflect the panorama of a territory left behind over decades, are supported by intrinsic local characteristics (weaknesses and weaknesses), combined with external influences (opportunities and threats), a path that is in turn elucidated in the light of theoretical-conceptual propositions related to the theme of development in general and local development in particular.

It can, therefore, be deduced that the article in preparation provides contributions of a theoretical-conceptual nature, by combining concepts and explanatory principles applicable to the condition of territories left behind, contributions of a descriptive nature by detailing the case study of a territory that fits into the theme of the special session 11 Left Behind Areas: Past, Present and Future.