

Article

# Building Bio-Districts or Eco-Regions: Participative Processes Supported by Focal Groups

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**Abstract:** Over the years, rural areas have faced a number of problems and difficulties, such as an increase in the average age of the population, desertification, loss of employment and the abandonment of rural and agricultural activities, which have led to the emergence of new initiatives aimed at revitalizing these territories from a social, economic and environmental perspective, such as the successful Bio-districts or Eco-regions (e.g., Bio-district of Cilento). Understanding and establishing a proper framework for each territory based on agroecology and participatory methodologies is still a challenge. In this sense, based on the analysis of two European examples—Cilento, Italy and São Pedro do Sul, Portugal—we described each of the building processes and defined a set of drivers that might constitute guiding principles to serve as a basis for the creation of Bio-districts or Eco-regions. The drivers' matrix identified was discussed in three focus groups carried out in Portugal in 2020. Such drivers included a technical and environmental component (the quality of the environment and landscape, the food system and the implementation of organic farming and agroecological practices), a social and economic component (valorization of the farmers, products and territories and a set of different stakeholders—farmers, consumers, schools, tourism entities and restaurants, local authorities) and a political component (the governance model). Most participants agreed that the recognition of a Bio-district or Eco-region should be informal, bottom-up, with farmers as the main pillar, with a fair and representative participation, namely family farmers.

**Keywords:** Cilento; sustainable territory; organic farming; agro-ecological practices; focal groups

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## 1. Introduction

In recent years, rural territories have undergone notable changes in terms of transformations in rural areas which have strongly influenced productive, environmental, commercial and even cultural activities and brought new challenges. Today, agriculture is no longer just a productive activity but a dynamic that can promote the development of territories through the integration of numerous services, from food production to consumption, and also by enhancing the landscape and associated ecosystem services [1,2].

With this change, there is also a change in mentality which includes a growing concern about the agricultural and environmental practices used. This can ensure the reduction of the impacts of agricultural activity and contribute to a more sustainable food system [3]. These concerns have been central since 2016 in the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), defined in the 2030 Agenda under the United Nations Development Program, which aim to guide political decisions to combat inequalities and problems in the world in the various dimensions of sustainable development (social, economic and environmental) and promote peace, justice and effective institutions [4].

Of the seventeen SDGs, many are dedicated to solving pertinent problems typical of rural areas: eradicating poverty; ending hunger; guaranteeing decent work and economic

growth; ensuring sustainable production and consumption patterns; promoting climate actions; protecting terrestrial life; creating partnerships for the implementation of the mentioned objectives [3,4]. With the emergence of these goals, it was possible to associate common themes such as the productive capacity of the agri-food sector, competitiveness, diversity in rural areas in face of new efforts in the conservation of the environment, food safety and quality, nutrition, animal health and welfare, biodiversity and climate change.

This paradigm shift is being reflected in the strategies created by Europe to create conditions for a healthier and more sustainable planet. In June 2019, the European Green Deal was launched, which aims to boost the efficient use of resources through transition to a cleaner and more circular economy, but also to restore biodiversity and reduce pollution. To this end, this pact foresees investing in technologies that are not harmful to the environment, supporting innovation while decarbonizing the energy sector, ensuring the energy efficiency of buildings increases and cooperating with international partners in order to improve the norm globally [5].

As part of this European Green Deal, the “From farm to fork” strategy [6] emerged in 2020 aiming to make Europe a more sustainable territory. From this strategy, a healthier and more sustainable European food system is expected. The main objectives of this strategy are:

- Ensure that Europeans have healthy, affordable and sustainable food;
- Combat climate changes;
- Protect the environment and preserve biodiversity;
- Guarantee a fair economic return in the food chain;
- Expand organic farming.

To meet these objectives, the European Commission intends, by 2030, to reduce the most dangerous chemical pesticides by 50%, reduce the use of fertilizers by 20% and reduce nutrient losses in the soil by up to 50%, since the excess of nutrients in the environment is the main source of pollution of soil, water and air, having a very negative impact on biodiversity and climate. The Commission also intends to reduce the sale of antibiotics for farm animals and aquaculture by 50% and, finally, aims to reach having 25% of useful agricultural area dedicated to organic farming [6].

In this landscape of change, several local initiatives have emerged with the objective of strengthening the rural environment through sustainable tools, which are capable of associating good practices and which allow curbing the aging of the population and desertification, improving the profitability of agriculture, supporting those intending to remain in the territories, mainly young people and favoring measures that benefit not only people but also the environment, as is the case with organic farming [7–10].

In response to this challenge, in 2009 in Italy, an initiative appeared for the first time through the creation of a Bio-district or Eco-region (hereafter referred to as Eco-region), with the objective of promoting a collective sustainable management of resources through the implementation of organic farming in a territorial approach, to create and reinforce links between different rural stakeholders (organic farmers, consumers, tourist operators, public authorities) contributing to a local development based on the conservation of resources, respect for the environment and, consequently, increasing the quality of life of the various actors involved [8].

The Eco-regions therefore aim to promote a biological or agroecological model within a framework of ethical, fair and solidary rural development, valuing natural and typical products in their territory of origin and contributing to the economic and tourist development based on respect and valorization of local resources [11]. In Portugal, the first Eco-region was created in 2018 in the municipality of Idanha-a-Nova, followed soon after in March 2019 by the São Pedro do Sul Eco-region and the Intermunicipal Community of Alto Tâmega Eco-region and, finally, in October of the same year, the Eco-region of the Left Margin of the Guadiana [12,13].

The Eco-region of São Pedro do Sul aims to promote local products obtained by agroecological or organic production systems in conjunction with the territory, in a perspective of regional development, particularly adjusted to a territory with a organic vocation where small and medium-sized farms predominate based on economic and social models that meet current societal challenges—namely concerns related to the need to ensure adequate food and nutrition, conservation of nature and natural resources and maintenance of the landscape and populations in their territories [14,15].

The present work aims to understand and establish a set of guiding principles based on agroecology and participatory methodologies to support the design of Eco-regions. We analyzed two European examples of Eco-regions—Cilento, Italy and São Pedro do Sul, Portugal—to understand their building processes and define a set of drivers that should be considered as guiding principles for the creation of Bio-districts or Eco-regions. In addition, we tried, through three focus groups organized in Portugal in 2020, to explore this drivers' matrix to understand which actors should be involved in the creation of an Eco-region, what are the main motivating forces and what contributions they can make to these territorial dynamics, and at the same time how to support and recognize these dynamics in other territories.

## 2. Eco-Regions—An Approach for Sustainable Rural Land Change

According to Basile [11], president of the IN.NER Network (International Network of Eco-regions), this development model is defined as follows:

*“An Eco-region is a non-administrative, but functional, geographical area, in which an alliance is established between farmers, citizens, tour operators, associations and public administrations, for the sustainable management of resources. This synergy takes place based on the biological principles and practices of production and consumption (short chain, organized groups of supply and demand, quality restoration, biological canteens). In the Eco-region, the promotion of organic products is intrinsically linked to the promotion of the territory and its peculiarities, to achieve the full development of the economic, social and cultural scope”.*

Thus, the term Eco-region refers to a territory within there is a cooperation between all local actors who identify organic farming or agroecology as a pillar of rural development [12]. These dynamics contribute to the improvement of environmental sustainability and climate resilience, triggering a virtuous cycle and aiming for the development of a healthy, sustainable and diversified food system [16].

However, an Eco-region is not only about organic farming. This initiative goes further, as it has as a strong objective in the revitalization of impoverished and abandoned rural territories. It is built in the center of the people who live in these territories and can provide them with better living conditions. In this way, this concept has a set of structural strategic objectives: internationalization, digitalization and valorization of the agricultural, cultural and environmental heritage, fighting against poverty in an integrated and synergic way.

In this way, an Eco-region should be based on three main dimensions that help the development of the territory where they are inserted [8,10].

- Social dimension: the development of social cohesion based on strategies for the development of a sustainable and inclusive territory, centered on the farmer, to pursue the promotion and improvement of social aggregation and cultural exchanges, to create new jobs, especially for vulnerable groups and through social farming and to ensure the revitalization of rural areas and the protection of the health of farmers and consumers.
- Economic dimension: centered on the economic benefits that agricultural, tourist, cultural and gastronomic companies can obtain by being part of an Eco-region by reducing organic certification costs, which still represent a very high value for the farmer, by emerging innovative economic activities, by increasing the territorial

value through marketing tools and by aggregating the local food supply and giving access to new market channels.

- Environmental dimension: implies the protection of biodiversity, using regional seeds and traditional varieties and the use of agroecological principles and practices, safeguarding natural resources, improving soil fertility and maintaining the landscape.

Having in mind these three pillars, this type of dynamic has all the know-how for a transition of the territory where it is applied, in a sustainable way, following the line of thought of the Sustainable Development Goal (SDGs) defined by the United Nation program for development, which involves solving the problems concerning rural areas: eradicating poverty, ending hunger, ensuring decent work and economic growth, ensuring sustainable production and consumption patterns, promoting climate action, protecting terrestrial life and creating partnerships for the implementation of the mentioned goals. Thus, Eco-regions, through the three pillars mentioned above, are very interesting dynamics to develop effective and sustainable territorial development strategies.

#### *A Brief History of Eco-Regions in Europe and Portugal*

The first Eco-region in Europe was born in Cilento, Italy on the initiative of farmers with the aim of promoting and selling the organic products produced on their farms [10].

Together with these farmers, the Municipal Council started to work on strategic objectives for the sustainable development of the territory and on the promotion and creation of a farmers' association. Cilento is a region that is very rich in natural resources (Cilento National Park, Diano and Alburni Valley, MAB-UNESCO Biosphere Reserve) and cultural attractions (Figure 1). In addition to this natural heritage, Cilento is also well known for its agricultural products, still processed by traditional methods, and for its food heritage, which is essentially based on old family recipes and traditions. The production of quality food represents an important feature of the diversified agricultural systems where organic farming is very intrinsic. There are approximately 450 organic farms, which, due to the need to market their produce, have joined forces and initiated the creation of the Bio-District of Cilento. However, the territory has witnessed a strong rural exodus, and consequently, a loss of agricultural and animal production activities, which has strongly influenced the landscape as the pastures, are abandoned. As well as agricultural land, the number of agricultural holdings, especially small ones, is decreasing and urbanization is moving forward, especially in coastal areas [17].

Cilento's pioneering experience is an important starting point and a reference case for many other initiatives that have emerged over the past few years, each with different characteristics and dynamics, but all sharing the Eco-region's vision and objectives.

Compared with the region of São Pedro do Sul, we can say that these regions have similar potentialities, but at the same time similar weaknesses.



**Figure 1.** Cultural, technical and environmental diversity in two European Eco-regions—Cilento, Italy and São Pedro do Sul, Portugal.

The region of São Pedro do Sul also has a very interesting natural heritage (Serra da Arada, Gralheira and S. Macário), enriched by its thermal waters, which are very popular for the treatment of several diseases. Besides this, São Pedro do Sul keeps alive some cultural traditions, having a privileged location that offers advantages for the development of several productive activities, essentially in agriculture and tourism [18,19]. However, as in Cilento, São Pedro do Sul has experienced a severe population exodus and consequently, a reduction in agricultural activity.

Based on the geographical, sociodemographic and economic characteristics of Cilento and São Pedro do Sul, as well as their evolution, we seek to systematize a set of characteristics that value them as Eco-regions (Table 1).

**Table 1.** Comparison of some characteristics of the Cilento and São Pedro do Sul.

Feature	Cilento	São Pedro do Sul
Area (km <sup>2</sup> )	3.196	348,68
Number of municipalities	32	1
Number of inhabitants	269.846	15.587
Year of creation	2009	2019
Promoting entity	AIAB	ABRE
Number of biological companies	400	18
Number of biological holdings	2500	18
Average area of biological holdings (ha)	5	7
Certification model	collective	private entities, financed by the municipality
Main crops	vegetables, trees, meadows and pastures	fruit and vegetable

Main actors	organic farmers, local government, tourism (beaches), consumers, schools	organic farmers, tourism (São Pedro do Sul thermal springs), consumers, schools, local authorities
Governance model	bottom-up, with the support of all local actors	bottom-up (farmers and other local actors) with the support of local government

Although these two regions are very similar, they have characteristics that differ, but with the same strong potential for the integration of an Eco-region. The population density of Cilento is much higher than that of São Pedro do Sul, as well as the number of organic companies; however, São Pedro do Sul integrates organic farmers with farms of a higher average size.

Both Eco-regions have organic farmers as their main actors, always being the basis of the territorial dynamic and creating the will for the implementation of a territorial approach. In both Cilento and São Pedro do Sul, organic farmers, family farmers and other small holders are pillars for the preservation of the territory, its practices and its traditions.

Tourism also plays a very important role in these two Eco-regions and the local authorities always appear as a support for the development of the project. In both regions, the dynamic success is due to the cooperation of other essential actors, namely schools, consumers and in particular local government for its capacity to promote sustainable agro-environmental policies for the territory.

Another interesting difference is the certification system for organic products. In Cilento, this certification is done collectively and participated, that is, it is done by peers who guarantee the quality and production practices. In São Pedro do Sul, product certification is carried out by private entities, dedicated to this purpose. Here, the municipality is sponsoring farmers that are in transition to organic farming and aim to integrate the Eco-region.

In these two Eco-regions, a bottom-up governance model was adopted, starting with the initiative of farmers who sought the support of associations and local entities, essentially to solve their marketing and production problems.

In Portugal, the first Eco-region was created in Idanha-a-Nova in February 2018 on the initiative of the municipality, which together with the various actors pursued the sustainable management of the territory based on organic farming. In April 2019, the São Pedro do Sul Eco-region was born, driven by the municipality and by the will of an association of farmers and other actors (hotels, restaurants, schools and social institutions) that was created for this purpose—Associação da Bio-Região de São Pedro do Sul (ABRE)—and in which everyone assumes a joint strategy for the sustainable management of resources based on agroecology and organic farming and respecting and valuing local resources. At the same time, the Intermunicipal Community of Alto Tâmega Eco-region, with a supramunicipal character, started organizing some activities to be recognized and operate according with the IN.NER directives. Finally, in October of the same year the Eco-region of the Left Bank of the Guadiana appeared, also with a supramunicipal character—it encompasses five municipalities: Serpa, Barrancos, Mértola, Moura and Mourão—born through a local development association (GAL) but following the same principles: the sustainable management of resources based on organic farming and on the respect and valorization of local resources.

The strength of this territorial approach is based on the involvement of farmers, associations, tourism entrepreneurs and other economic sectors, as well as schools, which, in conjunction with the local government, fulfil common objectives that allow presenting and defending the territory as a collective committed to agroecology [20].

### 3. Materials and Methods

#### *A Qualitative Exploratory Approach Anchored in Focus Groups*

In recent years, the European Commission has invested in promoting focus groups with experts in the field of agriculture, in particular with the purpose of systematizing cases of good practices in the different sub-sectors of the activity [21]. Following this orientation, the focus groups were used within the qualitative approach [22] as a technique for gathering information in an exploratory perspective of listening to key actors about the governance models, stakeholder involvement and minimum parameters for the recognition of an Eco-region. The aim was to understand the perspective of the participants (individually and in groups) through the sharing of their experiences, perspectives, opinions and meanings [23].

With this main objective, focus groups were designed as a collective group interview in which key informants had practical and experiential knowledge about the issue under analysis. Focus group discussion is a technique where a researcher assembles a group of individuals to discuss a specific topic, aiming to draw from the complex personal experiences, beliefs, perceptions and attitudes of the participants through moderated interaction [24,25]. The focus groups methodology was also adopted to ensure a deeper involvement of the most relevant stakeholders in different Eco-regions to facilitate a participative definition of the guidelines for the implementation of Eco-regions.

Under the initiative of the National Rural Network, in the context of “Eco-regions: an integrated strategy for the development of rural territories”, three focus groups were organized in which people from different sectors participated (farmers, local authorities, schools, leaders of associations, consumers, tourism entities), representing different Eco-regions: Viseu (S. Pedro do Sul Eco-region), Serpa (Left Bank of the Guadiana Eco-region) and the online (Intermunicipal Community of Alto Tâmega Eco-region) (Table 2). This allowed for perspectives from different contexts, but with a similar willingness to participate in an Eco-region. The participants were selected according to their specificities and potential contributions to the issue under analysis, meeting the criteria of familiarity with the topic [26]. These are the requirements known in the literature as fundamental to foster dialogue and interaction on the one hand, and avoid constraints and conflicts [22,27] on the other, creating a favorable environment for the sharing of ideas and exchange of opinions.

**Table 2.** Focal groups characteristics.

<b>Focal group</b>	<b>Viseu</b>	<b>Serpa</b>	<b>Penafiel (online)</b>
Date	18 February 2020	26 February 2020	10 November 2020
Number of participants	44	28	50

Participants included farmers and their associations, as they believe that an Eco-region is an asset to sell their produce, to ensure healthier foodstuffs and the sustainability of the agricultural environment; consumers that are looking for healthier foodstuffs; schools pursuing access to quality, nutritional food and educating future consumers; tourism related stakeholders, as Eco-regions constitute gateways for tourists; and local authorities and governmental technicians that act as facilitators in the development of these dynamics.

A participative “Word café” methodology was used to organize the focus groups as this allows a high number stakeholders to be involved in the data collection process, especially in bottom-up participatory research approaches, namely to find sustainable solutions to global challenges such as food security, where the process is necessary for co-creating knowledge that benefits both science and society [28]. The guidelines and questions for the focus groups organization are presented in Tables 3 and 4.

**Table 3.** Focus groups guidelines.

Feature	Description
System	rotation
Number of groups	3
Number of participants per group	6 to 15
Number of facilitators per group	2
Number of rapporteurs per group	1
Duration of each round (minutes)	30
1st round	20
2nd and 3rd round	60
Duration of the final debate (minutes)	60

**Table 4.** Focus groups questions.

Issue	Question
Stakeholders	Who are the actors to be involved in the process of building the Eco-region and what is their contribution/role?
Governance	Which governance models/processes are considered most relevant for the constitution of Eco-regions?
Recognition	Within the framework of minimum parameters that make it possible to recognize an Eco-region, which ones are considered most relevant?

The session started with a presentation of the project “Eco-regions: an integrated strategy for the development of rural territories” by the technician of the National Rural Network, during which it was explained that the project, financed by the Rural Development Program 2014–2020, includes the creation of a “Manual for the Eco-regions” with the objective of parameterizing and defining a model of Eco-regions that can be recognized and supported at national and international level.

Each round was assigned to a specific room. The process began with a first round of conversations for each small group seated around a table in the assigned room. At the end of the round, the members of the group moved to a different new round/room. Only the table facilitators/rapporteurs stayed to welcome the next group and briefly fill them in on what happened in the previous round, using the flipchart/chart as a visual reminder of the previous conversation.

Each round was pre-designed with one question tailored to the specific context and objective of the session (Table 4). The same question was repeated for the following group. The question was at the forefront of discussion to ensure it was in the minds of all participants.

To facilitate the analysis of the information collected, both audio and video were recorded, ensuring the informed consent of the participants and the anonymity of the speech [29] in accordance with the ethical and deontological requirements of research. The information collected was subjected to a categorical content analysis. The analysis and categories presented below are in the process of validation, so they should be understood as provisional.

#### 4. Results and Discussion

Table 5 summarizes the results of the three focus groups in relation to the three topics presented in the session: stakeholders, governance and recognition.



**Table 5.** Results of the Focus Groups organized in Viseu, Serpa and online in 2020 under the project “Eco-regions: an integrated strategy for the development of rural territories”.

		Viseu	Serpa	Penafiel
Who are the actors to be involved in the process of building a Eco-region and what is their contribution/role?	Farmers	x	x	x
	Consumers	x		x
	Schools	x	x	x
	Tourism	x	x	x
	IPSS's	x	x	
	Logistics operators		x	
	Associations	x	x	x
	Restaurants	x	x	x
	Municipalities Associations		x	
	Local development associations		x	
	Public institutions		x	
	Municipalities	x	x	x
Which governance models/processes do you consider most relevant for the constitution of Eco-regions?	Formal			
	Informal	x		x
	Farmers	x		x
	Municipalities	x	x	x
	Municipalities Associations			x
Within the framework of minimum parameters that make it possible to recognize an Eco-region, which ones are considered the most relevant?	Local development associations		x	
	Farmers associations	x		
	Product certification	x	x	
	Food quality control	x	x	
	Organic farming	x	x	x
	Commercialization	x	x	x
	Work in the territory			x
	Local production and consumption	x	x	x
	Sustainability	x	x	x
	Training		x	x
	Nature conservation	x		x
Traditional knowledge			x	
Local produce valorization	x	x	x	
Technical support	x		x	

#### 4.1. Who Are the Actors to Be Involved in the Process of Building a Bioregion and What is Your Contribution/Role?

The answer to the first question posed during the focus groups, “Who are the actors to be involved in the process of building the Eco-region and what is their contribution/role?” i.e., which groups of stakeholders need to be present in an Eco-region? Who should be part of it? was unanimous: farmers are the pillars of an Eco-region.

At all sessions, farmers were considered central players in these territorial dynamics as they are the ones who, through sustainable production systems such as organic farming, guarantee consumers quality products while promoting the sustainability of their territories, preserving the soil, water, biodiversity and landscape, among others.

*“...in this process, the Municipality of Serpa only works with farmers in organic farming, as organic farming defines an Eco-region...”, woman, Serpa*

*“Farmers must be the first to enter, because they are the ones who allow the rest”, woman, Viseu*

In the Italian Eco-regions' initiatives, the farmers are the main stakeholders, integrated in the local social and environmental context [30]. The valuation of local skills and knowledge, namely related with farming, will boost the self-awareness of farmers and change their willingness to foster innovative solutions and advantages and contribute to the territory itself [31]. In addition, farmers have other advantages such as the possibility of selling their produce locally and being part of the multifunctional local tourist circuit (bio-farms, bio-routes, bio-educational farms, bio-social farms), with an increase in the farmers income [30,32].

It was also unanimous in all groups that training and technical education should have a prominent role in an Eco-region, since it is through it that knowledge emerges to help farmers in technical terms, combining innovation with traditional knowledge and allowing them to produce more and better products.

*"...the difficulty of working in organic farming is often due to a lack of technical knowledge...the price of organic products could be much closer to the price of conventional products, but for this to happen, it is necessary to know how to do it, through technical advice, hence the importance of professional schools, polytechnics ...", woman, Serpa*

*"...regarding the actors, I don't see higher education institutions there, and therefore, the question of knowledge is sorely lacking in a process of this nature..." woman, Serpa*

Agricultural training and education is considered a fundamental tool to support the transition to agroecology, empowering farmers to strive for a more sustainable and effective approach to production [33,34].

Catering and hotels, schools and solidarity institutions are other stakeholders identified as important, not only because they can absorb part of the local food production by including meals prepared with local organic products, but also for education and dissemination of these initiatives through younger generations (the future consumers) and touristic dynamics.

*"...it is possible to create a very interesting dynamic not only in terms of production but also transformation, combining schools, tourism, IPSS's in a very dynamic project around certified organic production..." woman, Serpa*

*"Tourism is something that can and should be considered in the Eco-region..." woman, Viseu*

The role of local authorities (municipalities) is essential to assist in the constitution and maintenance of Eco-regions, namely in terms of supporting the certification process. Most participants agreed that municipalities that still adopt strategies that compromise the sustainability of the territories (for example that support intensive agriculture or the use of glyphosate) are not prepared to initiate this type of dynamic.

*"Either the municipalities pay or find alternative systems of certification between peers, which guarantee this certification", woman, Viseu*

*"...I do not see that there is an Eco-region where, for example, the Municipality does not end with glyphosate, it doesn't make sense, on top of that it's called Eco-region and it is completely contradictory, unless you want to have an Eco-region with objectives that have nothing to do with what is intended, or else the name is changed", woman, Viseu*

*"I would really like the public bodies of the territory to be here...the Regional Directorate for Agriculture, the Institute for Conservation of Nature and Forests...because if anyone knows the reality of the territory, it is them", man, Penafiel*

The local authorities are assuming a central role in these innovative solutions [30,35], especially as they are in line with SDGs, defined by the United Nation and pursued by the local and national policies of countries.

#### 4.2. Which Governance Models/Processes do You Consider Most Relevant for the Constitution of Eco-regions?

Regarding the second question—Which governance model should support an Eco-region?—opinions were divided, but most believe that farmers should be at the base of the governance model to be established in the Eco-region, always with the support of municipalities.

Once again farmers appear at the forefront of an Eco-region. For most participants in the focus groups, farmers are the main actors to be part of an Eco-region, but at the same time they are the ones who should be the basis of the governance model; however, farmers should always count with the support of other actors, especially the public entities such as the municipality, so that there is a peaceful and positive governance to create a positive environment for all the stakeholders and the territory.

*“...first of all, farmers but then all other companies that can see an added value in this, which can be dynamic but also encouraging ...” woman, Serpa*

*“I think it must be an independent, non-profit association with the participation of local authorities. This is the model that should be because it is the only one that allows participation by all sectors (consumers, restaurants, canteens, schools) and the local government as an integral partner. It cannot depend on political cycles, but the representative of the municipality should be there. The other models that we have seen, if the municipalities do not work well, people do not participate, because they feel this is one more thing from the municipality. I might not identify myself with the municipality, as there are political issues involved”, man, Viseu*

Regarding the type of process leading to the construction of the Eco-region, the participants agreed that the model to follow should be based on the initiative of local actors (bottom-up) and not by determination of local governance bodies (top-down). However, it was also mentioned by several participants there is a need for criteria, rules and guidelines issued by the local and/or national authorities or even by international ones, such as IN.NER.

*“At this moment when thinking about the genesis of the Eco-region, it does not make any sense to have a formalization process organized top-down”, man, Penafiel*

*“There must be an appropriation of the model by the local actors. But the logic must always come bottom up. However, there may be guiding-lines that can arise from the top-down, if there is strategic line for the territory...”, woman, Viseu*

The bottom-up approaches are based on the principle that decision-making about the strategy and the priorities are a responsibility of the local actors. In fact, the LEADER bottom-up rural development model, adopted in the European Union, had as its major driver the flexibility that allowed local authorities to adapt to the diversity of challenges existing in the European rural space [36]. The success of the “bottom-up” strategies, namely in rural development processes, should include the rural development actors and their expertise, integrated in a common vision of the territory and the activities linked to the local economy [37].

Regarding the recognition of Eco-regions, namely whether the process should be formal or informal, the majority agreed that it is essential there should be a recognition of the process/model to be implemented, but without this leading to more bureaucracy, which ends up holding back the design and performance of this Eco-region. Therefore, an informal recognition process should be envisaged among peers whether at the local, regional, national or international level.

*“I personally believe that these models can only work within informality. From the moment that we impose and establish regulations, there no longer exists a spontaneous and free nature”, woman, Viseu*

*“In a formal model, we go from having participation models to having top-down models imposed in regulatory terms and opposition will start to emerge”, man, Viseu*

*“There should be no more bureaucracy in recognition, above all it should be a declarative qualification of the stakeholders of a region, having an action plan aimed at the sustainability and promotion of organic farming, increasing their representativeness and adapting agricultural holdings to this sustainable production system”, man, Penafield*

A multi-actor governance and knowledge integration are considered to be two key elements in the governance of systems directed to transforming the agri-food sector by enabling the involvement of the relevant local actors, who are indispensable for the co-creation of dynamic processes that are capable of achieving sustainable development [38–40].

#### 4.3. Within the Framework of Minimum Parameters that Make It Possible to Recognize an Eco-region, Which Ones Are Considered the Most Relevant?

In the last question, which was related to the minimum parameters required for an area to be recognized as an Eco-region, the most mentioned parameter was the existence of organic farming in the territory, accompanied by a certification process and mechanisms that guarantee the commercialization of the produce.

*“Being committed to the creation of an Eco-region, we will defend organic and certified productions, with space for agroecology”, woman, Viseu*

*“The Eco-region must be a facilitator for the commercialization in the territory where they are produced, but we cannot have a goal attributed to that”, man, Serpa*

*“In addition to organic farming, an Eco-region must integrate and support family farming, since these small farmers are essential for the development and management of the territory”, woman, Viseu*

*“Eco-regions can be a way to boost family farming”, woman, Viseu*

In relation to the three topics issued, different representations and perceptions were captured but a majority of participants mentioned that farmers and organic farming should be at the center of the Eco-region, but always in straight collaboration with a wide set of stakeholders (Table 5), that a bottom-up model will favor a participative implementation of the Eco-region and that informal and less bureaucratic guidelines are more likely to ensure the adhesion of a wider number of territories.

## 5. Conclusions

Through this work, we aimed to understand the main drivers that should be considered as guidelines for the creation of the Bio-districts or Eco-regions that are emerging through Europe as solutions to the problems that threaten the rural world and endanger its existence and survival.

In this sense, based on the analysis of Cilento Bio-District, Italy and São Pedro do Sul Eco-region, Portugal and on the results of three focus groups organized in Portugal it is possible to propose some ideas to design such guidelines that might be considered for designing future policies and programs to support these initiatives.

Both regions are easily recognized as Eco-regions as they congregate the main features to consider: an important agricultural tradition, a richness that is easily perceived in the landscape and biodiversity, a traditional food system that ensures food safety and contributes to several economic activities, an agroecological sector in strong expansion, a potential for touristic development and the willingness of the different actors to associate among themselves to pursue the same goals, commit to the development of the territory and play a relevant role in local decision-making processes.

In this paper, we have used focus group methodology to understand the building processes and define drivers to consider for the creation of Bio-districts or Eco-regions. This methodology allows the majority opinions to be reported but also obtains a diversity of views as far as possible within the groups to recognize normative discourses that take into consideration the conflicts and contradictions. Nevertheless, focus groups may favor

opinions that are socially accepted which means that some participants might dominate the research process. Even when using an adequate set up and a balanced group, these limitations should not be ignored.

In addition, it would be very interesting to organize similar groups in other countries where the economic, social and political context differs to compare different scenarios that might facilitate or constrain the development of Bio-districts or Eco-regions.

It was unanimous that farmers are the basis of the Eco-regions that cannot exist without them, but through agroecology. However, it was also the general opinion that farmers cannot work alone in an Eco-region but should be a part of a multi-stakeholder network. In fact, research and technical entities should be involved to provide technical advice and innovative knowledge in combination with traditional knowledge: restaurants, tourist entities, schools and social organizations are powerful partners in promoting the territory and can also absorb part of the local food production and ensure organic meals in their kitchens, and the local authorities that are central as facilitators and supporters for the local policies related to technical support, commercialization and certification are other fundamental stakeholders that need to be involved.

Regarding the governance models, it was obvious that the majority of those present agreed that the recognition of Eco-regions should be informal and bottom-up, with farmers and its associations at the base of the model but ensuring that all local actors can participate and that everyone is represented, namely the most disadvantaged groups such as family farmers. Above all, there must be an active involvement of all, whether farmers, consumers or local authorities.

Finally, it should be noted that the focus groups contributed to defining guidelines for the creation and support of an Eco-region based on the participants representations and will contribute to the construction of a manual for Eco-regions within the scope of the project “Eco-regions: an integrated strategy for the development of rural territories” of the National Rural Network, which aims to support the construction of Eco-regions adjusted to the reality of national rural territories. This manual also intends to support and inform all territories that are interested in joining the IN.NER regarding the implementation, operationalization and monitoring of the proposed development model.

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