

GORTA: when social innovation helps revitalise abandoned land

The abandonment of agricultural land in the Rioja Valley, Spain, is a growing problem with consequences for the attractiveness and competitiveness of the region, but also for the maintenance of landscapes and local biodiversity. The GORTA Operational Group is seeking to find new models for the exploitation of abandoned walnut plots through social innovation.

Scope and consequences of agricultural land abandonment

Land abandonment is a challenge in Spain, where one million hectares of arable land were affected by land abandonment in 2017 according to a survey carried out by the national Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food and Environment. The Rioja Valley, in Northern Spain, is no exception. For the sector of walnut cultivation alone, the Department of Agriculture of the Autonomous Community of La Rioja reported in 2017 that 32 hectares of land (117 plots) were semi-abandoned and 19 hectares (93 plots) were fully abandoned.

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In the Rioja Valley, land abandonment is driven by different factors, including the difficult access to agricultural areas, which are often isolated and located on steep slopes. Moreover, the region is facing an overall demographic change with the ageing of the population, the lack of generation renewal, including in the agricultural sector, and depopulation.

The consequences of land abandonment are also diverse and lead to a vicious circle of lost productivity and attractiveness. From an economic point of view, the abandonment of land over a long period of time reduces the quality of production and makes the farms obsolete due a lack of renovation or modernisation of the infrastructure. The poor condition of farms de facto reduces the attractiveness of agricultural land for young farmers who want to start cultivating. Furthermore, from an environmental point of view, the abandonment of plots leads to the spread of invasive species and the growth of shrubs, thus increasing the risk of fires with impacts for biodiversity and landscapes.



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Social innovation as an approach against land abandonment

In the Rioja Valley the [GORTA project](#) (Grupo Operativo de innovación para la recuperación de tierras abandonadas - Innovation Operative Group for the recovery of Abandoned Lands) is working to find a tailor-made solution for the territory to deal with land abandonment.

Solutions already explored elsewhere cannot be effectively applied in the Rioja Valley, such as land banks, which allow young farmers to rent plots from farmers or owners who are no longer farming. From the one hand such solutions are often too expensive for young farmers. On the other hand, it means legally transferring land ownership, which many landowners refuse despite wanting to stop production on their land, often for sentimental reasons. Local producers' associations have for example received support requests from landowners who were unable to manage their plots but did not want to give up on land ownership either.

To overcome this specific challenge, the GORTA project has chosen a social innovation approach. The overall idea of the project is to propose a new business model for these farms, in order to avoid the land abandonment while not transferring land ownership. The project started by quantifying the

abandoned or semi-abandoned plots in the area. Partners then deployed communication efforts by organising workshops in different municipalities to inform farmers, landowners, communities and policymakers about the potential solutions. Feasibility studies were conducted with agricultural consultancies to analyse the conditions of use of these abandoned lands and landowners were connected with young farmers looking for plots to cultivate.

GORTA uses dialogue to find solutions that are tailored to each landowner and that result in a win-win situation, whether it is on access to land for young farmers or the fight against land abandonment. So far, the GORTA project managed to find agreements between land transferors and assignees on 12 walnut tree plots. Plots were never sold, and different approaches were used. In some cases, owners decided to opt in the end for a classic lease, others chose a model where they only grant authorization to cultivate, and others let the land be cultivated rent-free in exchange of a percentage of the land's profit.

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The dialogue between the different actors involved has resulted in the rehabilitation of these 12 plots through cultivation and has helped new entrants to find land. In the long term, the GORTA project hopes to extend the dialogue to enable the reclamation of more abandoned plots, thus creating a virtuous circle for the attractiveness and agricultural competitiveness of the region.

Governance and resources

GORTA is an Operational Group led by [Carna](#), an agricultural technical advisory organisation. The project was carried out between 2019 and 2022 with an overall budget of 45,100 euros, funded by the 2014-2020 rural development funds dedicated to Operational Groups.



Innovative aspect

Land abandonment and takeover by new generations is a common concern in remote and hard-to-reach mountain areas. Existing solutions to land abandonment and land access may not be replicable in all regions, due to legal, financial or cultural barriers. The GORTA Operational Group's social innovation approach has demonstrated that dialogue between stakeholders can help overcome these obstacles by creating new models of land use adapted to each farm.

