

Article

# Demographic conditions and territorial development of Torre de Moncorvo (North of Portugal)

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**Abstract:** The development of some rural areas, such as most municipalities in the Portuguese interior, is completely dependent on the maintenance and retention of their population. The strengthening and qualification of a minimum number of inhabitants are necessary for the local dynamization processes. In this paper, it is proposed a theoretical approach and the data presentation for a case study—the municipality of Torre de Moncorvo in the Douro Valley region (northern Portugal). The main objective of this contribution is to demonstrate that population maintenance is crucial to local development. The social, economic, and territorial aspects are mutually dependent and determine the sustainability and the future dynamics of this kind of rural territory.

**Keywords:** population; rural areas; sustainability; local development; social development

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## 1. Introduction

The development dynamics of socially and economically peripheral areas, such as most municipalities in the Portuguese interior, are completely dependent on the maintenance and retention of their population or, at least, on the strengthening and qualification of a minimum number of inhabitants, necessary for the local dynamization process. The main literature related to this subject outlines, in the case of the rural<sup>1</sup> area, the importance of agriculture, mainly the studies of Kayser et al. [1] and Varela [2].

It's our aim to underline that all the different topics (demographic, social, economic, and environmental) are mutually related and are very important to the development of this territory. For that reason, it will be considered not only a revision of the bibliography<sup>2</sup>, but also the population database and the analysis of the economic and social activities and their recent dynamics.

To describe the recent demographic evolution of the municipality of Torre de Moncorvo (Douro valley region—northern Portugal) and its consequences in the topics of the local economy, namely in the agricultural sector of wine and almond cultivation and in the dynamization of the activity regional tourism and the municipality itself. The three domains are even mutually dependent, as pointed out by Mendonça [3,4] or Teresa et al. [5].

## 2. The problem of local development in rural areas

Although it is not the primary objective of this contribution, it is important to reflect a little, in theory, on the design of rural areas in the interior of Portugal in a process of demographic shortage of population. Academic studies on issues of local development in rural areas usually address the contributions and variables that lead to the development of these types of areas. Below we can refer to a summary diagram

that allows us to visualize these dimensions:

Economic recovery, based for the most part on direct and indirect employment generated by activities in the primary sector, namely agricultural and livestock production, reveals a strong dependence on natural conditions, which, due to their variability, do not always guarantee productive and profitable agricultural years. In contrast, the close connection between agricultural and agroforestry cultivation and the maintenance and enhancement of the landscape make these activities essential for their multifunctional enhancement (for example, the possibility of maintaining the natural diversity of these spaces, the capacity for tourist use of the territory in question, and the maintenance or otherwise valorization of the local demographic contingent).

The environmental component is closely related to landscape issues and the natural resources present. Forest and agricultural settlements, surface and underground water tables, and their necessary preservation and safeguarding (even through their agricultural use and human and animal/plant supply), as well as others related, for example, to mining extraction or energy production, are all elements to consider in this field.

Social: this attribute can include the local inhabitants and those who visit the municipalities in question, aspects that are very dependent on diversity and mainly on the quality of existing public services. Consider the provision of healthcare and the field of education for children and young people. Still in this item, it is also important to guarantee good local and regional accessibility, among other aspects. In summary, demographic maintenance is a primordial condition for each of the previous aspects of the development of this type of area (economic, environmental, social), since without it all these components of development can be put into cause. Even if they have virtues and comparative advantages compared to other more competitive areas on the coast (a natural environment that is more protected from human overuse, just to mention one example), the shortage of population can condition and even endanger all of them (the aspects of development). Transposing this type of approach to the territory of Torre de Moncorvo (in the Douro region—north of Portugal) is the next objective of this contribution.

### **3. Geographical setting of Torre de Moncorvo**

Torre de Moncorvo belongs to the northern region, district of Bragança, and flanks the Douro valley to the north in its upper section of the Portuguese part. Some of its parishes even belong to the Vale do Douro Wine Region, therefore combining technological, social, and economic traditions, to which can be added the physical or natural aspects of the landscape of this famous river valley (**Figure 1**).

This wine-growing region is unique, and that led to classifying the Douro as a living evolutionary cultural landscape of importance for humanity (by UNESCO). Regarding the Douro Demarcated Region, we should remember two of the basic concepts of the classification: integrity and authenticity, as ways of valuing material and immaterial aspects that require extensive efforts to preserve and regulate the culture of the vineyard, villages, and other constructive elements, as well as the landscape itself.



Figure 1. Torre de Moncorvo municipality.

It is important here to focus on the issue of regional tourist use and the development of the municipality of Torre de Moncorvo. It can be said that there are multiple advantages resulting from the tourist use of this type of area. Among them, it should be highlighted the possibility of promoting the wine region with a consequent possible increase in sales volume; new business opportunities linked to tourism emergence; settling population in low-density areas; and preserving and valuing traditions linked to vineyard cultivation and wine production. In fact, the National Strategic Plan for Tourism (PENT) highlights the topic of gastronomy and wine as particularly important for the strategic axis of a territory, destinations, and products<sup>3</sup>. The territories and destinations result from the fact that wine tourism units, spread across a large part of the national territory<sup>4</sup>, are mostly linked to wine routes and inserted in demarcated regions. According to PENT, gastronomy and wine are one of the ten strategic tourism products to be developed and will have a high contribution to the value proposition of the destination Portugal (Figure 2).



Figure 2. “Pinhão” Village—The Douro Wine Region (Credits by the author).

Wine tourism is a form of social and economic revitalization of some territories since, in addition to traditional wine routes, vineyards and wine museums, stays on farms with agritourism, visits to cellars, wine courses have emerged in recent years, oenology and tasting centres linked to wine, wine-growing villages, visitor and interpretation centres, new hotel units linked to health and well-being tourism (wine therapy), to name just a few examples.

This activity functions in many regions and for their population as an alternative to improve their quality of life (see in this regard many of the ideas contained in the preparatory work for the classification of the Alto Douro Wine Region as World Heritage), and it also allows to improve the awareness of residents for the high heritage value of traditions linked to vineyards and wine.

It is on the agricultural slopes of the Douro valley that the predominance of vineyards is overwhelming. However, at higher elevations, places that we can now classify as the “sub-plateau Douro”, on steeper slopes, there is forestry and sub-Atlantic bush occupation in discontinuous portions, which at certain times of the year stand out for their strong colour. In May, the yellow tufts of the broom stand out between the valley bottoms, typically Mediterranean in appearance, and the plateau region (**Figure 3**).



**Figure 3.** Image of the Douro wine region classified as world heritage by UNESCO (Credits by the author).

Its intermediate nature allows the coexistence of an arboreal layer in which species such as oak (*Quercus Robur L.*), cork oak (*Quercus Suber L.*), maritime pine (*Pinus Pinaster Aiton*) come together, and in the shrub layer, the already mentioned

broom, gorse (*Ulex Spp.*), the strawberry tree (*Arbustus Wedo L.*), the “Estêvão” (*Cistus Populifolius L.*), etc.

The succession of rounded peaks dominates in the lands closest to the Douro valley, generally belonging to the schist complex, and which gives it a certain landscape regularity, changes when we move to granite soils. In certain contact areas, the differences in level are more abrupt, which results in sharp breaks in river slopes or in the presence of considerable elevations, places suitable for the establishment of hermitages and viewpoints (in the case of Torre de Moncorvo, the Reboredo Mountain range). Although there may be local variations, the massifs are generally divided by a series of orthogonal divisions, which forms a succession of rounded blocks of varying size but which become striking in the landscape, especially in areas that are most devoid of vegetation. The contrast between the Douro Demarcated Region and the granite area with an Oro-Atlantic appearance that lies to the south is visible.

To the south and southeast extends the extensive plateau area where fruit crops, in this case, almond trees, prevail, although in the foreground they coexist with vineyards. Few spaces are not occupied by some of these two crops. Small patches of arboreal vegetation with darker foliage, corresponding mainly to maritime pines (*Pinus Pinaster Aiton*) and more rarely to small oak chestnuts (*Quercus Robur L.*), appear amidst a lighter green, corresponding to orchards and vines (**Figure 4**).



**Figure 4.** Image of the Douro wine region classified as world heritage by UNESCO “Pinhão” village (Credits by the author).

If along the Douro River the houses dotted along the valley (“Solar’s” and “Quinta” houses), in this area isolated houses rarely appear; they are grouped in clusters of different configurations: linear, following the road communication routes, population centres relatively dense in which housing is grouped around a central square, or even dispersed and without a well-defined geometric order.

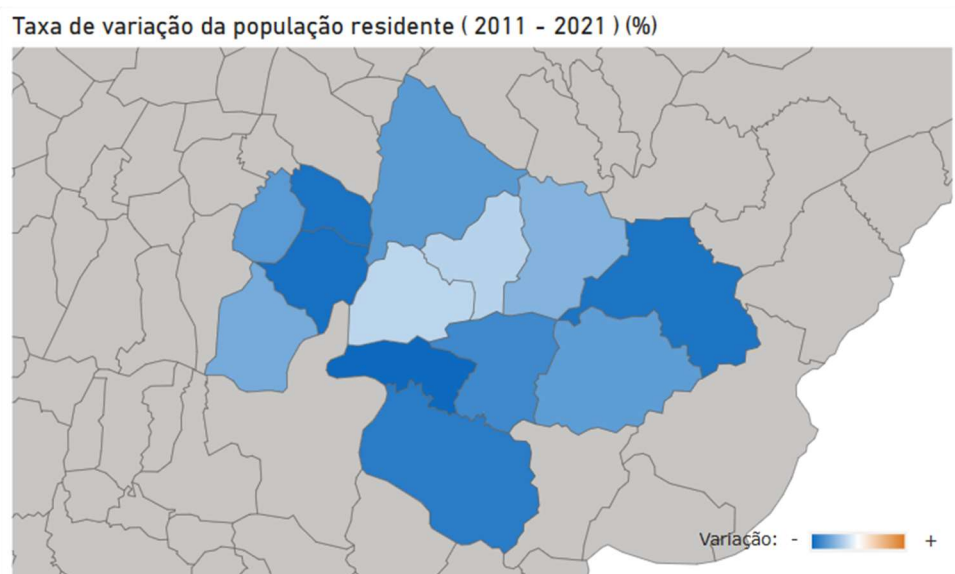
Vineyards mark the landscape of the Douro region, whether in its cities and towns or punctuating rural buildings, as they played and continue to play an important role in the processes of modernization and restructuring of viticulture and tourism. Its role is especially important in the process of disseminating and valuing regional wines, particularly those with greater projection in terms of national and international sales, linked to the most recognized grape varieties. The greater economic capacity and dynamism of some of its owners, such as producer-bottlers, are not unrelated to this

phenomenon. At the same time, its prestige and the renown of its houses are also linked to embarking on wine tourism activities linked to the Port and Douro Wine Route. The important role that this activity can play in the conservation and promotion of wine properties and their architectural and heritage legacy is unquestionable, and at the same time, tourism contributes to the appreciation of the local environment and its traditions, disseminating to those who visit these units and the region a whole set of material and immaterial resources of undeniable value.

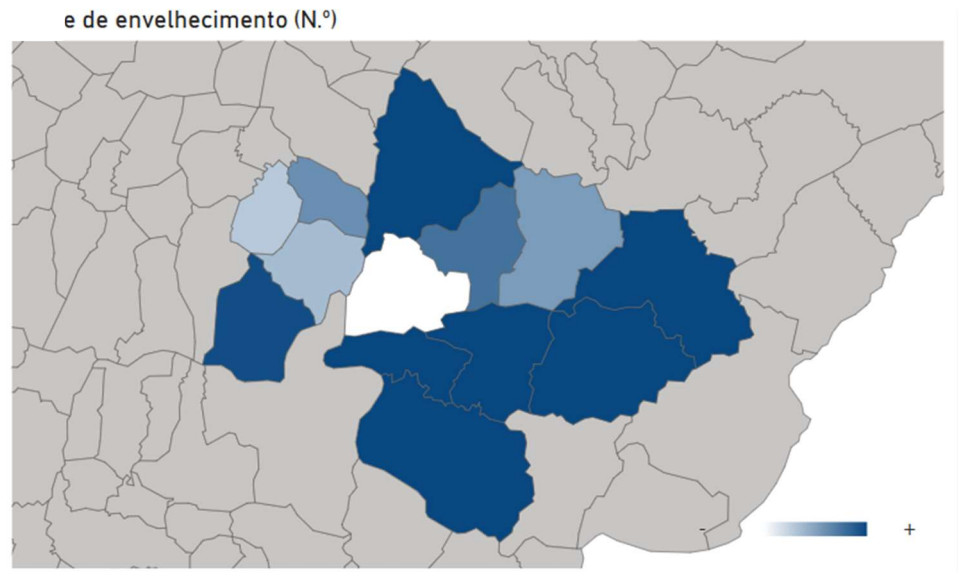
In summary, the hypsometric sketch of the region allows us to roughly describe the distribution of the various types of agricultural crops and the organization of the settlement. Using a “figurative” image of the morphology of Torre de Moncorvo, it resembles a hand, with the douro running along the ends of the fingers. The interdigital space represents the main tributaries of this portion of the north bank. The part corresponding to the parishes included in the Douro Demarcated Region occupies the southernmost portion, where the slopes are slightly steeper and the altitudes are between 250 and 600 m.

#### 4. Demographic dynamics in Torre de Moncorvo

The demography of the municipality of Torre de Moncorvo does not contrast with the dynamics of population loss (decrease in the resident population, increased dependence on young people in the face of an increase in the elderly population) that is seen in most rural areas in the interior of mainland Portugal (**Figures 5 and 6**). Therefore, it can be concluded that all parishes have lost population, including the municipal main village, and that the aging rate is high, more significantly in parishes with greater rurality. In all the parishes, the percentage of population decline goes from 9.75 to 33.65, with the highest values corresponding to the less dynamic ones in terms of economic strength (**Figure 5**). The number of aging population goes from 925 (in the Torre de Moncorvo main centre) to 2665 in the less dynamic parishes (**Figure 6**).



**Figure 5.** Population declines in the municipality 2021/2011 (%).



**Figure 6.** Ageing population in the municipality (number).

There are multiple factors explaining this demographic trend: emigration abroad and to the most dynamic areas of Portugal, particularly the city of Porto and its immediate surroundings; double aging that generates a decline in synthetic fertility rates in the municipality; population concentration only in the municipal main village, etc.

These demographic references impact not only the quantitative aspects of the total population residing in the municipality, but also qualitative aspects related to the degree of qualification of the available labor force and consequently the type of productive fabric that can be boosted locally, such as the vineyards. This will be seen in the next chapter on action proposals for the development of this territory.

## 5. Conclusions

Despite the difficult demographic situation, it is proposed to attract new population groups and requalify existing ones. As proposals for dynamizing the municipality, 3 areas of strategic action are referenced:

A-Territory and tourist product “Moncorvo vineyards”:

Creation of the “Moncorvo vineyards seal” and applying it to different products and tourist offers of a cultural and environmental nature (landscape), including the wine tourism route itself. Reinforce the redevelopment of public equipment along the route.

B-Tourist promotion:

Establish an online platform for disseminating regional and local tourist resources, namely the use of the “Sabor lakes” and the cultural landscape of the Douro vineyards.

C-Institutional and business articulation:

Creation of an interpretative center linked to wine and local cultural traditions and an enoteca in the municipality and the establishment of protocols that allow greater dissemination of the resources of the municipality of Torre de Moncorvo (for example with the Douro Museum, with wine operators Douro River cruises, etc.).

Depending on the territorial framework described and the proposals presented, it

is concluded that the proposals presented are just a few more ways of valuing and revitalizing a rural territory with a weak social and economic base. The historical nature of this region (like the Douro Demarcated Region as a whole) presupposes that particular attention is paid to the distinctive characteristics of its territory and the necessary preservation of its values. From the previous point, resources such as wine tourism must be viewed according to a multifunctional vision of the rural environment.

**Conflict of interest:** The author declares no conflict of interest.

## Notes

- <sup>1.</sup> For the French case Kayser, B.; Brun, A; Cavailhès, J.; Lacombe, P. For a chosen rurality (French) (1994) Marseille, Datar/Éditions de l'aube, p. 10–17.
- <sup>2.</sup> In several contributions we've written about the Douro region, mainly pointing out the agricultural dynamic and its agrotourism role as in Mendonça, J. (2020) Know-how and agriculture and wine-growing traditions of a monastic community in Proceedings of Cultural Sustainable Tourism Congress (CST) 2nd Edition, 2020, Instituto Universitário da Maia, Maia, 13 out.
- <sup>3.</sup> Second most important form of tourism, just after the City Breaks–10%.
- <sup>4.</sup> More than 500 economic investors related to wine tourism (C. f. Wine tourism action plan 2019-2021, from “Turismo de Portugal IP”.

## References

- <sup>1.</sup> Kayser B, Brun A, Cavailhès J, Lacombe P. For a Chosen Rurality (French). Datar/Éditions de l'aube; 1994.
- <sup>2.</sup> Varela JAS. Agriculture and Rural Space (Portuguese). Ministério da Agricultura; 1992. pp. 115-120.
- <sup>3.</sup> Mendonça J. Know-How and Agriculture and Wine-Growing Traditions of a Monastic Community in Proceedings of Cultural Sustainable Tourism Congress (CST), 2nd ed. Instituto Universitário da Maia; 2020.
- <sup>4.</sup> Mendonça J. Towards a geography of tourism and agrarian initiatives. The case of Lamego and Távora. PASOS Revista de Turismo y Patrimonio Cultural. 2022; 20(5): 1163-1170. doi: 10.25145/j.pasos.2022.20.078
- <sup>5.</sup> Teresa S, Carlos Coelho P, Rui C, et al. Living and Knowing How: Traditional Technologies in the Douro Region: Preliminary Studies (Portuguese). Museu do Douro; 2003. pp. 11-15.