

Diogo Miguel Pinto^{1*}; Helena Pina¹; André Samora-Arvela²; João Pedro Barreiros³
¹CEGOT, Faculty of Arts, University of Porto
²ISTAR, ISCTE – University Institute of Lisbon
³ESAC, Faculty of Arts, University of Porto
[*dspinto@letras.up.pt](mailto:dspinto@letras.up.pt)

INTRODUCTION

In recent years, some European rural areas have shown signs of revitalization, driven by innovative initiatives, even in the face of a sharp demographic and economic decline. However, many of these territories face critical challenges, such as isolation from communication networks, loss of population and services, and reduced economic competitiveness. In Portugal, these difficulties are evident in rural areas in the interior, where agricultural abandonment and population ageing have caused profound changes in the landscape and socioeconomic structure. In light of this scenario, it is imperative to implement policies that mitigate these problems and promote long-term sustainability. With projections for the coming decades showing little encouragement, it is urgent to rethink the policies to be adopted and define a strategy with ambitious objectives that recognizes regional potential and places it as a basis for sustainable development.

OBJECTIVES AND METHODOLOGY

In this sense, the present exploratory research aims to understand how the themes of sustainable development and innovation in rural spaces are being used and perceived by different actors. To achieve this objective, we will implement a questionnaire survey in three distinct phases, namely: the "Sustainable Development and the Future of Rural Spaces" Seminar on May 12, 2023, in Mesão Frio; the "Polyfaceted Paths of Rural Development" Workshop on May 25, 2023, at the University of Porto; and the "II Cycle of Conferences on Dynamics in Rural Spaces" on November 29, 2023, also at the University of Porto (Figure 1).



Figure 1: Images from the diverse events organized. (Source: Authors).

These events made it possible to analyze diverse perspectives and opinions from experts, researchers, policymakers, students, several other professionals and local agents on pressing issues affecting rural spaces. These scientific events were a privileged forum for instructive discussion and sharing various experiences and perspectives. This convenience sample, 179 responses were collected, allowing for a good analysis of different perspectives. Thus, responses were collected from a diverse audience interested in the future of rural spaces.

The questionnaire was structured to capture participants' perceptions of a series of statements about sustainable development in rural areas. Based on the Likert scale (Figure 2), respondents were asked to indicate their degree of agreement, on a series of statements, namely: Sustainable development strategies are essential for the future of rural communities (Statement 1), Current sustainable development policies are sufficient for economic growth and improving the quality of life in rural areas (Statement 2), and innovation can be a solution to address socioeconomic problems in rural areas (Statement 3).

This approach allowed for a qualitative analysis of participants' opinions and experiences, contributing to a deeper understanding of the challenges and opportunities of rural spaces.

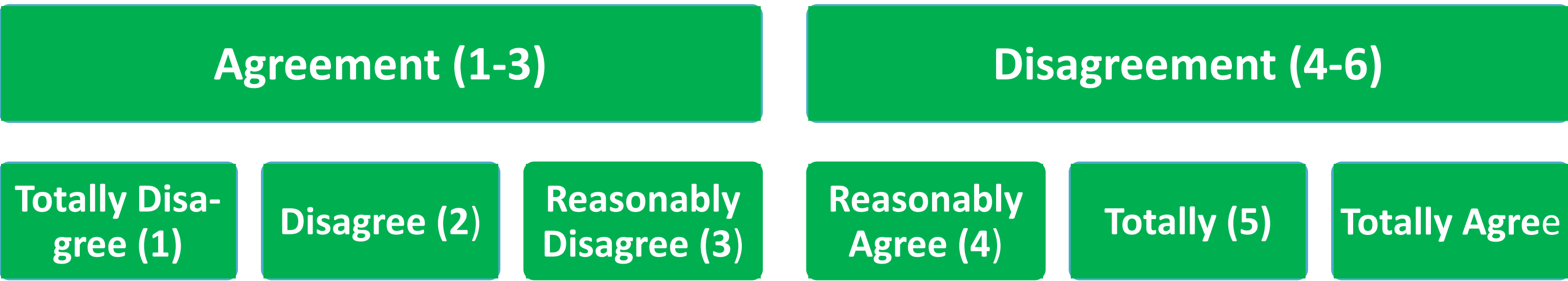


Figure 2: The Likert scale was used in the questionnaire to measure participants with six levels of agreement. (Source: Authors).

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RESULTS

The results for each statement on Sustainable Development and Innovation in Rural Spaces are as follows (Table 1):

Statement 1: The analysis reveals a mean of 5.74 and a standard deviation of 0.50, indicating a high concentration of responses at the highest levels of agreement. Specifically, 77.09% of participants selected "Strongly Agree" (level 6), followed by 20.11% choosing "Agree" (level 5) and 2.79% choosing "Somewhat Agree" (level 4).

Statement 2: The results show a primarily negative perception among the participants. With an average of 2.90 and a standard deviation of 1.25, it can be seen that 73.18% of the responses are at disagreement levels: 49.16% disagree, and 20.67% reasonably disagree, with 3.35% totally disagreeing. Only 5.03% totally agree, 8.94% agree, and 12.85% indicate reasonable agreement, evidencing a critical view of the effectiveness of current policies.

Statement 3: The results indicate a mostly positive perception. With a mean of 4.96 and a standard deviation of 0.91, there is a significant level of agreement: 27.93% of participants marked "Totally Agree", while 49.16% chose "Agree". Additionally, 16.20% indicated reasonable agreement. The sum of these responses represents 77.29% agreement, suggesting a consensus that innovation is seen as a potentially influential factor in addressing socioeconomic challenges in rural areas. On the other hand, a small percentage disagreed: 4.47% chose "Reasonably Disagree", and 2.23% chose "Disagree", and there were no total disagreement responses.

These results underscore the importance of policies that align with the real needs of rural communities, where innovation and tailored strategies can drive sustainable transformation.

Table 1: Frequency and percentage for each statement . (Source: Authors).

STATEMENT 1			STATEMENT 2			STATEMENT 3		
LEVEL	FREQUENCY	%	LEVEL	FREQUENCY	%	LEVEL	FREQUENCY	%
1	0	0	1	1	6%	1	0	0%
2	0	0	2	2	88%	2	4	2%
3	0	0	3	3	37%	3	8	4%
4	5	3%	4	4	23%	4	29	16%
5	36	20%	5	5	16%	5	88	50%
6	138	77%	6	6	9%	6	50	28%

CONCLUSION

Even though it is an exploratory study with a convenience sample, it is possible to conclude that: (1) There is a strong consensus that sustainable development strategies are crucial for the future of rural communities; (2) There is a perception that current sustainable development policies are not sufficient to meet the needs for economic growth and improved quality of life in rural areas; (3) Innovation is seen as a potentially significant solution to the socioeconomic problems in rural areas in Portugal, given the existence of broad agreement among participants.

These findings highlight the need for more effective policies and a more precise role for innovation in driving sustainable development in rural areas.