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CONCURSO DE ESTUDOS DE CIÊNCIA PARA AS POLÍTICAS PÚBLICAS

Environmental Outcomes in Public Policy

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Executive Summary

Portugal's Montado silvopastoral system—covering 1 million hectares and delivering key ecosystem services—is in long-term decline, losing around 2,500 ha/year. Traditional agri-environmental schemes under the CAP have focused on prescribed practices, generating high administrative burden and limited environmental impact. To reverse degradation, policies must reward measurable ecosystem outcomes, not compliance.

Main Research Findings

Results-Based Models (RBM) work, but governance gaps undermine performance. The annual funding cycle and late approval of budgets create long periods without operational capacity, interrupting training, field assessments, and farmer support.

Local Support Offices play a fundamental role, but the allocation of functions needs to be reconsidered. The evaluation of visual indicators and the direct contact with beneficiaries reveal significant bottlenecks and highlight the need to redefine the functions assigned to each participating entity.

Farmer engagement remains low. Although demand for enrolment is high, only ~20% of farmers show active, informed management; attendance in training is below 20%. Mandatory training can increase trust and understanding of RBM.

Scoring is robust, and adjustments can improve the monitoring system. The mode-based scoring system is resilient. Visual soil indicators perform well, and accuracy can be increased by tailoring the system to soil types.

Investment barriers persist. Payments above score 5 cover operational costs but do not support essential long-term investments (tree regeneration, soil improvement, fencing). A dedicated investment support scheme should be coupled with the measure and made rapidly accessible to beneficiaries.

Eligibility criteria exclude the area's most in need. Degraded Montado stands do not meet minimum thresholds to enter the scheme, blocking recovery where it is most urgent.

Key Policy Recommendations

1. Strengthen governance: establish a small independent technical unit (3–4 evaluators) to conduct all field assessments and ensure multi-annual financing for Local Support Offices. Centralising specific functions can enhance transparency, standardisation, and fairness.

2. Increase farmer engagement: make training mandatory, expand hands-on learning and mentoring, and centralise technical support for beneficiaries.

3. Improve payment structure: combine result-based payments with targeted investment grants and create a base payment or parallel track for degraded areas (below score 5).

4. Enhance policy coherence: align administrative plot definitions with paddock-level management, include shrub-dominated areas typical of extensive systems, and ensure RBM aligns with the Nature Restoration Law.

5. Consolidate Results-Based Models in the next CAP revision: The pilot demonstrates that RBM generate transparency, measurable outcomes, and strong societal legitimacy—features increasingly required under the EU Nature Restoration Law and Green Deal objectives.

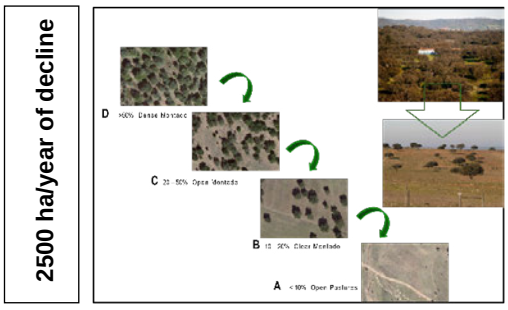
Introduction and problem statement

The policy challenge

The Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) is one of Europe's most powerful policy instruments, shaping 76% of European land through farming and forestry.

The Pillar 2 of the CAP includes agri-environmental schemes. Traditionally these schemes pay for practices rather than results, with limited proof of effectiveness, high bureaucracy, and weak accountability.

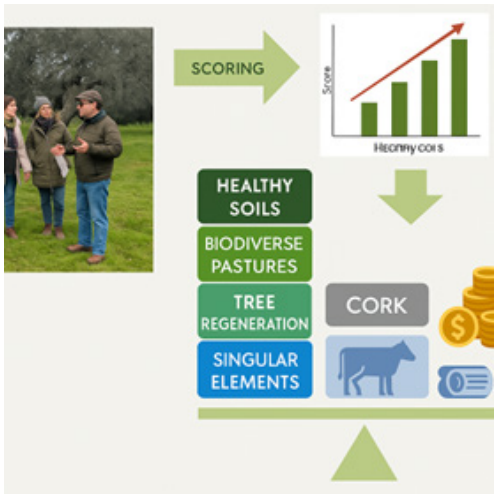
In Portugal, the Montado silvopastoral system is a cultural, economic, and ecological asset, occupying 1M hectares in the South. Yet it is in steep decline, losing around 2,500 hectares annually. Previous policies have failed to halt this trend. Montado decline is a slow but cumulative process: adult tree mortality increases, and young trees fail to establish due to insufficient protection, creating a long-term regeneration gap.



A paradigm shift: Results-Based Models (RBM)

Results-Based Models (RBM) link payments To directly to environmental outcomes, assessed annually through agreed visual indicators. Farmers gain flexibility to decide how to manage the plots in this scheme. Technical advice is fundamental to support their decisions.

Public money is tied to verified improvements, ensuring greater efficiency, accountability, and opportunities for innovation.



Portugal's first RBM pilot: Intervention D2.2 Montado Results-Based Management

Launched in 2023 under the CAP Strategic Plan (PEPAC), the intervention targets two Natura

2000 sites: Monfurado and Guadiana Valley. It focuses on four environmental results:

- healthy soils
- Tree regenaration
- biodiverse pastures
- singular landscape elements

To measure these environmental results, 10 visual indicators were defined and monitored annually:

A1 Degree of soil coverage by Rumex bucephalophorus and Chamaemelum mixtum

A2 Extent of bare soil

B1 Density of tree regeneration at shrub stage

B2 Conservation status of regeneration

C1 Existence of herbaceous balance in the pasture

C2 Degree of thistle cover

C3 Degree of shrub cover

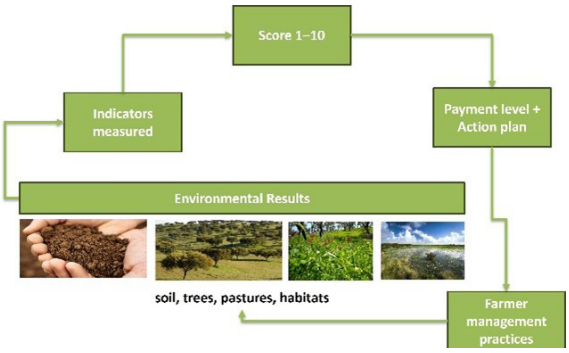
D1 – Diversity of singular landscape elements

D2 – Representativeness of singular landscape elements

D3 – Conservation status of singular landscape elements

Each plot (20–50 ha) is scored on a 1–10 scale. Payments begin at score 5 and increase with higher results. To support implementation, Local Support Offices (GLA) were created, coordinated by the University of Évora/MED together with producer associations. The associations are responsible for:

- Signing technical assistance contracts with beneficiaries
- Collecting and organising farm documentation (registry, shapefiles, parcel maps)
- Carrying out field visits to assess visual indicators of sub-parcels (initially supervised by MED, later independently)
- Entering collected data into the scheme's digital platforms
- Supporting beneficiaries in drafting action plans, in coordination with the lead team
- Providing local technical advice (in person and by phone)
- Mobilising farmers to participate in the scheme and in training activities
- Disseminating information about the intervention and its results within the farming community



Why this matters now

After three years of testing, it is time to assess achievements, challenges, and possible adjustments before the end of the current CAP period.

Lessons from this pilot are relevant for:

- Scaling up this system from the pilot to larger Montado areas
- Other farming systems where RBM are being developed
- The implementation of the EU Nature Restoration Law, which requires measurable ecosystem recovery
- Reflecting on 30 years of CAP in Portugal—shifting from compliance to environmental performance

Analysis / Key Findings and Their Policy Implications

Methodology in Brief

Mixed-methods approach: continuous participant observation, surveys, statistical analysis of 2024–2025 field campaigns (with extension planned to 2027) and meta monitoring (including soil sampling). To validate and refine the draft recommendations, two workshops were organ-

ised in September 2025: one in-person (12 September) and one online (30 September). These sessions involved a wide range of stakeholders, including producer associations, academics, and public administration. The final recommendations presented here reflect the feedback and priorities expressed in these workshops.

Key Findings

Governance & Delivery Capacity

1) Role mismatch: associations vs. the demands of a results-based model

Evidence

- Heavy coordination needs, with frequent meetings just to clarify roles and schedules
- Operational bottlenecks: late field visits, limited experience in direct observation, delays in uploading data
- Workload peaks: Other supports' application period overlaps with the season where assessment of environmental indicators is to be done
- Statistical analysis shows that association technicians consistently award higher scores to indicators than the technical team of the University. Associations themselves acknowledge that it is difficult to remain impartial due to their long-standing relationships with producers.

Policy implication

Separate functions: allow producer associations to focus on their strength—administrative support—while concentrating field assessments in a dedicated technical team. This would improve consistency, predictability, and data quality.

2) Stop-start financing undermines GLAs and reduces planning capacity

Evidence:

- Annual calls, heavy bureaucracy, slow expense validation, and delayed payments create resource instability.

Policy implication

Shift to 5 years budgeting and streamlined rules for GLA to ensure continuity and lower transaction costs. Budget for this scheme under the control of the Planning and Policy Agency which also decided on the Pilot to be implemented.

Farmer Engagement & Learning

3) High initial demand, low active engagement

Evidence

- Applications: 308 beneficiaries / 36,764 ha; commitments: 173 beneficiaries / 6,500 ha.
- Attendance: ~10% (applicants) and 20% (in commitment) in info/training sessions.
- Profiles: ~20% show active management; ~80% join primarily for financial reasons.

Policy implication

Results-based payments generate strong interest but, on their own, have shown so far to be insufficient to change management practices. Lasting practice change requires mandatory training, continuous capacity-building, long term guarantee of financial mechanisms based on results, and close technical support to build farmers' confidence and skills.

Centralise all contacts with beneficiaries in a fully dedicated technical office to ensure greater efficiency, consistency in communication, and uniform quality of support.

In a centralised and autonomous structure, engage producer associations as key partners for rapid, direct communication with beneficiaries, while maintaining their role as trusted intermediaries in the territory.

4) Training shifts perceptions and reduces uncertainty

Evidence (pre → post training)

- Perception of results adequacy: increased from 55% to 90%, while uncertainty dropped from 45% to 10%.
- Perception of indicator adequacy: increased from 66% to 90%, while uncertainty dropped from 31% to 10%.

Policy implication

Make training mandatory; strengthen hands-on field sessions and peer mentoring to speed up adoption and improve management quality. These opportunities should also be opened to farmers outside the intervention.

Indicators, Scoring & Robustness

5) Environmental variability does not affect the final score

Evidence

- Significant differences by year and month/ rainfall in some indicators (A1, B1, C1), but no significant effect on the final score used for payment.

Policy implication

The scoring method (mode with precautionary rule) is robust to seasonal/environmental variation—reliable for payments.

Concentrate field assessments within consecutive weeks/months, even if starting in different moments in the two intervention areas. This ensures an equitable process across beneficiaries, where seasonal variations affect all evaluations in the same way.

6) Balancing Results and Practices for Slow-Response Indicators

Evidence

- Some indicators, such as tree regeneration, respond slowly and are difficult to capture within the short monitoring cycles of the current intervention.
- Farmers face high upfront costs and risks when investing in tree regeneration, particularly in degraded areas.

Policy implication

Introduce hybrid support schemes (results + practices) for slow-response indicators such as tree regeneration. This could take the form of an additional, optional commitment within Intervention D2.2, where beneficiaries agree to maintain Montado plots with individual tree protectors for the entire duration of the commitment.

7) Scoring method matters: mean inflates, mode stabilises

Evidence

- Mean vs mode: mean produces significantly higher scores ($p < 0.001$); mode yields stability and resilience.

Policy implication

Keep mode as the payment basis to safeguard equity.

8) Evaluator experience/independence influences payments

Evidences

- MED < Associations in A1, A2, C2, C3 and final score (associations tend to score higher; $p \leq 0.008$).
- This directly affects scores and payments.

Policy implication

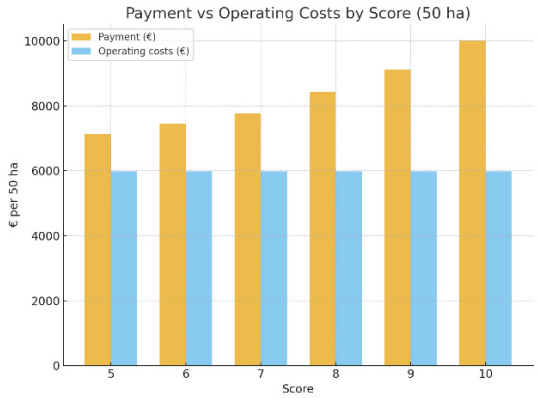
Mitigate bias: use a small, specialised, independent assessment team (3–4 assessors), with standardised training and no prior ties to beneficiaries.

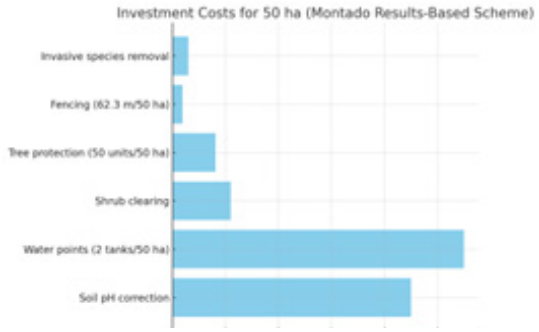
Payment Structure & Inclusion

9) From score 5 upward, payments cover operational costs, but investments remain a barrier

Evidence

- For 50 ha, payment – operating cost rises from €1,150 (score 5) to €4,040 (score 10); over 5 years: €5,750 → €20,200.





- Investment needs (soil correction, water points, fencing, tree protection, invasive removal) are not covered by per-hectare payments alone—especially hard for smaller farms.

Policy implication

Pair results-based payments with fast, predictable investment grants to secure cashflow for transition.

10) Eligibility rules exclude the most degraded areas

Evidence

- Minimum tree/canopy thresholds exclude degraded Montado—where intervention is highly needed.

Policy implication

Introduce a base (score < 5) support or a parallel track/another scheme for degraded areas to enable entry into recovery pathways.

11) Administrative unit ≠ management unit

Evidence

- The administrative plot might not matche the practical paddock; mixed commitments create incoherence and exclude critical gaps (e.g., clearings lacking regeneration).

Policy implication

Align plot registry (iSIP) with the paddock logic: allow adjacent-unit integration and ensure multi-year stability of areas for consistent monitoring.

Ensure stability of intervention areas by preventing annual changes to plots.

12) Visual soil indicators are robust and can de more accurate by adjusting to soil type

Evidence

- Joint analysis of visual indicators A1 and A2 with soil chemical properties shows consistent relationships:

- A1 is positively associated with soil organic matter and calcium and negatively associated with phosphorus and manganese.

- A2 is positively associated with pH and soil organic matter.

- Metamorphic soils (gneisses) show distinct patterns—more acidic, nutrient-poor, and more prone to Rumex/Margaça dominance—affecting indicator scoring.

Policy implication

Adjust visual indicators to different soil contexts, either through differentiated weighting in the scoring formula or by adapting the interpretation of each indicator to soil type (granite vs metamorphic).

Secure continuous monitoring funding until the end of PEPAC to consolidate relationships between visual indicators and the ecological status of the Montado.

In the next CAP cycle, require a baseline soil characterisation for each commitment area to ensure comparability, accuracy in scoring, and fairness in result-based payments.

Limitations & Future Research

- **Short time window (2024–2025):** trends are promising; confirmation requires **2026–2027** data.

The findings presented are based on the first three years of implementation (2023–2025). Given the complexity of ecological processes in the Montado, longer-term monitoring (until 2027) is required to confirm the consistency of results. Short-term improvements are promising, but caution is needed when extrapolating

- **Management-practice data** still **insufficient** for robust causal links—database expansion underway.
- Need **integrated cost–benefit** analysis (payments + investment + transaction/opportunity costs) across **farm types**.

Policy Alternatives

1. Governance and Implementation

Option A: Centralised technical evaluation (independent team)

- *Advantages:* reduces bias; increases consistency and credibility; easier to harmonise assessment calendar across regions.
- *Disadvantages:* can reduce proximity to beneficiaries in the short term.

Option B: Decentralised evaluation (producer associations, current model)

- *Advantages:* strong local presence; uses existing staff.
- *Disadvantages:* evidence of bias and inconsistent scoring; administrative overload during the CAP's Single Application period; weak technical expertise in field observation.

2. Farmer Engagement

Option A: Voluntary participation in training (current model)

- *Advantages:* flexible and attractive to farmers; lower immediate administrative burden.
- *Disadvantages:* results show low attendance (10–20%); 80% of participants remain passive, motivated mainly by payments; weak link between funding and active management.

Option B: Mandatory training and stronger peer-to-peer learning

- *Advantages:* capacity building proven to increase trust (perception of adequacy of results rose from 55% to 90% after training); practical visits and mentoring could foster active management.
- *Disadvantages:* possible resistance from some farmers.

3. Payment Structure

Option A: Payments only for areas above threshold score 5 (current model)

- *Advantages:* strong incentive to achieve measurable results.
- *Disadvantages:* excludes degraded areas (in significant need of recovery).

Option B: Hybrid structure – base payment + investment support

- *Advantages:* ensures degraded areas are included; helps cover upfront investment (trees, fencing, soil correction); aligns with EU Nature Restoration Law.
- *Disadvantages:* requires higher administrative effort and coordination with investment funds.

Policy Recommendations

1. Strengthen Governance

- Establish a national technical unit (3–4 independent evaluators) to conduct all indicator assessments, ensuring consistency and avoiding conflicts of interest.
- Stabilise funding by moving away from annual calls to multi-year predictable financing, reducing uncertainty and administrative burden.

2. Increase Farmer Engagement

- Make training sessions mandatory to ensure minimum technical knowledge.
- Create mentorship programmes linking experienced active managers with passive participants.
- Promote on-farm demonstrations to show tangible benefits of active management.
- Secure universal and quality proof advisory

3. Improve Payment Structure

- Introduce a base payment for degraded areas (scores below 5) to incentivise recovery or design a specific measure for low-density Montado.
- Ensure dynamic adjustment of thresholds and payments based on monitoring data.
- Link result-based payments with investment support (tree planting, fencing, soil correction), using a fast-track mechanism similar to the Burren Programme.

4. Enhance Policy Coherence

- Adapt CAP administrative tools (plot vs. padock unit) to real farm management units, allowing integration of singular landscape elements and degraded patches.
- Adopt eligibility criteria to include areas with shrub characteristic of Mediterranean extensive pastoral systems
- Align RBM with the EU Nature Restoration Law, using shared indicators and monitoring systems to scale lessons beyond the Montado.

Conclusões

- **Paying for results works:** scoring is **robust**, ties public funds to **verified improvements**, and **motivates**—when paired with **capacity-building**.
- **Organisation matters: independent technical assessment** combined with **administrative support** by associations increases **credibility**, consistency, and **fairness**.
- **No transition without investment:** combine per-hectare payments with **rapid investment grants** to unlock adoption, especially from **low scores**.
- **Include to restore:** create **entry points** for degraded areas and align the registry with the **paddock** to maximise **environmental impact** and policy **coherence**.

The Montado Results-Based Intervention (D2.2) is a pioneering effort in Portugal, marking a shift from practice-based to outcome-oriented agri-environmental schemes. After three years of implementation, the evidence shows both promise and challenges. On the one hand, payments linked to measurable results are attractive to farmers and align with EU demands for accountability and efficiency. On the other, weaknesses in governance, limited farmer engagement, and gaps in payment structures risk undermining the scheme's potential.

The analysis highlights three main lessons:

1. **Governance matters –** decentralised evaluation through producer associations has created inconsistencies and conflicts of interest; independent, centralised technical teams are essential for credibility and fairness.
2. **Capacity building is decisive –** while most farmers join for financial reasons, training clearly increases trust, knowledge, and active management; mandatory and practical training, complemented by peer-to-peer mentoring, can accelerate change.
3. **Payment design must be inclusive and realistic –** combining results-based payments with base support and investment funds, is more equitable and more effective. Degraded Montado, where restoration is most needed should be included.

Post-PEPAC

Looking beyond the current CAP programming period, it is crucial to ensure the continuity and expansion of the results-based model tested in the Montado. Evidence shows that the current intervention is too limited in geographical scope and excludes some of the areas where intervention is most needed. To secure long-term environmental outcomes, the intervention should expand to degraded areas: include Montado areas in advanced decline as priority recovery zones, rather than excluding them through eligibility rules.

Moving forward, the adoption of these policy alternatives and recommendations is crucial. They will not only improve the effectiveness of CAP in Portugal but also provide a tested model for scaling results-based approaches to other farming systems and for supporting the Nature Restoration Law. By strengthening governance, investing in farmer capacity, and designing more inclusive payments, Portugal can ensure that public funding truly delivers environmental outcomes.

The Montado will be the first real test of Portugal's ability to align public funding with genuine environmental outcomes. The opportunity is here — missing this moment will compromise the next decade of agricultural and conservation policy.

Technical Note

This work used ChatGPT (OpenAI) exclusively for support with orthographic and stylistic editing, as well as for the creation of non-photographic conceptual images. All technical, scientific, and interpretative content is the sole responsibility of the authors.

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