

## 1280 APPROACHES TO MUNICIPALITIES' ASSOCIATIONS: THE CASE OF THE INTER-MUNICIPAL COMMUNITY OF ALTO ALENTEJO

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### ABSTRACT

After 1974, Portuguese municipalities witnessed an increase in their responsibilities, political powers and decision' capabilities. However, it soon became clear that they did not possess the technical and financial means to implement all these new assignments. Some projects are only achievable from a given range: so from an early age the need for supra-municipal structures became clear. Some examples include intercity road networks, river basins or strategic planning. The question of scale is essential both for the development of certain projects, and for an integrated approach to the problems that cross the municipalities' boundaries, in which only a larger territorial scale ensure conditions to guarantee its success. This paper seeks to put in evidence that the phenomenon of municipalities' clustering emerged in a context in which there were various pressures for its creation, due to the lack of intermediary institutional bodies between central and local administration. It analyses the setting up process of new "meso-entities" (based on voluntary will and recognized by public deed), the impact on local development and the main strategies and approaches to promote economic growth. The case study of the Inter-municipality Community of Alto Alentejo is analysed in detail. The authors argue that this type of local structures present a significant degree of efficiency to overcome the difficulties encountered in establishing administrative regions.

**Keywords** – Municipalities' Associations; Alto Alentejo; Local Development.

### 1. INTRODUCTION

After 1974, Portuguese municipalities witnessed an increase in their responsibilities, political powers and decision' capabilities. However, it soon became clear that they did not possess the technical and financial means to implement all these new assignments. Some projects are only achievable from a given range: so from an early age the need for supra-municipal structures became clear. Some examples include intercity road networks, river basins or strategic planning. The question of scale is essential both for the development of certain projects, and for an integrated approach to the problems that cross the municipalities' boundaries, in which only a larger territorial scale ensure conditions to guarantee its success.

From the very beginning, the creation of Municipalities' Associations (AM) aimed to solve problems that municipalities alone, for lack of scale and means, could not resolve. After the failed attempt to create political regions, in 1998, through a national referendum, Laws no.10 and 11 of 2003 were approved. They defined, respectively, the responsibilities and powers' framework of the *Metropolitan Areas* (be it "Large Metropolitan Areas" or "Urban Communities") and the *Inter-Municipal Communities of Public Interest*.

These two types of municipalities' associations - the Great Metropolitan Area (GAM) and the Urban Communities – were rapidly extinct, giving rise in 2008 to the Inter-Municipal Communities (Law no. 45/2008). These new entities were responsible for urban spaces' planning and management, joint metropolitan and supra-municipal investments and the relationships between central and local governments.

The process of setting up these new entities, based on voluntary activity and recognised by public deed, seemed to be the best solution to overcome the difficulties encountered in establishing administrative regions. The phenomenon of clustering of municipalities emerged in a context in which there were various pressures for its appearance, due to the lack of intermediary institutional bodies between central and local administrations.

### 2. REGIONAL DEVELOPMENT AGENCIES AND INTER-MUNICIPAL COMMUNITIES

Regional Development Agencies (RDA) - created in Portugal by the Law no.88/99 of 19<sup>th</sup>.March - with the assignment to contribute to the social and economic development of their areas, were the first non-political attempt to promote joint municipal territories.

A RDA constitutes: (i) an operating tool for all regional actors; (ii) an interface support between its members and the national and international institutions for projects' implementation; and (iii) a direct projects' promoter, creating and disseminating an image of quality and technological development. This means that RDA's are bodies of mixed composition, which put together companies, business associations, local authorities and associations, universities, professional training institutions, charities and other entities (NGO's, ex.).

Among the main areas of policy intervention, one can point out the following: economic development; education, training and employment; environment; spatial planning and urban planning; rural development and forestry; tourism promotion and organization; culture; and cross-cutting actions to promote services and other activities. Typically, these agencies have multidisciplinary technical teams with experience in regional development, being able to appeal to specialised consultants support. There were 16 RDA's in 2000 (see Fig.1).

On what concerns Inter-Municipal Communities (CIM's), they are public law legal persons, subject to the rules of administrative supervision, and intermediate bodies between Central Government and Local Authorities. CIM's constitution initiative lies on the municipal councils, leaving the agreement build-up and the definition of its statutes to the approval by the municipal assemblies.

CIM's can be viewed as contracts, where municipalities' executive bodies intended to promote the following public purposes: a) multidimensional strategy on planning and management, taking into account the economic, social and environmental features of each CIM territory; b) inter-municipal investments articulation; c) participation in the management of regional development programs (ex: under the NSRF or "Portugal 2020"); d) planning of supra municipal authorities actions.

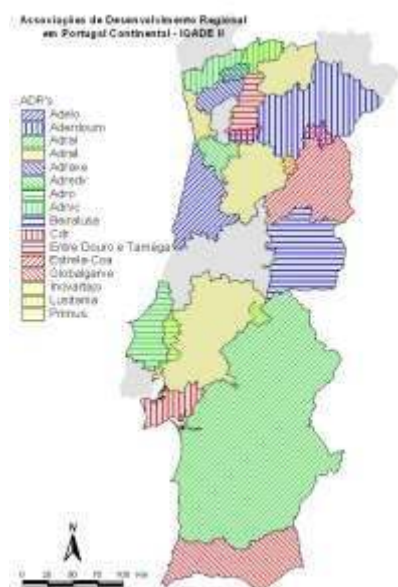


Fig.1 – Regional Development Agencies in Portugal

Source: SALVADOR, R. et al. (2000, p.1229).

It is up to the CIM to ensure actions' coordination between municipalities and central government in the following areas: a) public supply networks, basic sanitation facilities, wastewater treatment and municipal waste; b) networks of health equipment/facilities; c) networks of educational and vocational training; d) land use, environment preservation and natural resources; e) safety and civil protection; f) mobility and transport; g) public facilities networks; h) promotion of economic, social and cultural development; i) networks of cultural, sports and leisure facilities.

CIM's responsibilities also include powers transferred from central government, the joint exercise of competences delegated by the municipalities (included in the respective CIM) and the local representatives' designation in public and private entities, where representation has an inter-municipal base. There are today 21 CIM's in Portuguese territory (Fig.2). One can see that there are similarities of the territorial division between RDA's and CIM's, even if it's not the case in the Alentejo.

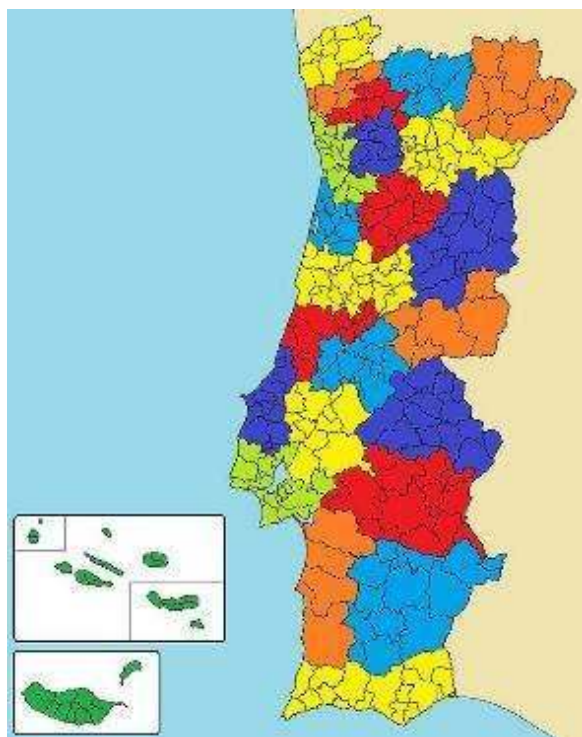


Fig.2 – Inter-municipal Communities, Metropolitan Areas and Autonomous Regions

Source: Wikipedia, 2013

The CIM's aim to promote the common interests of the associated municipalities, boosting its integrated and sustainable development, enhancing partnerships, creating synergies and maximising complementarities. They also intend to create innovative,

attractive and competitive regions, facilitating sustainable growth and economic and social cohesion. To this end, CIM's can be associated either with public or private entities or with the social the cooperative sector. CIM's can also create inter-municipal companies, in order to explore activities that pursuit objectives of public interest on subjects which remain within the scope of their assignments.

CIM bodies are the following: the Inter-municipal Assembly; the Inter-municipal Council; the Inter-municipal Executive Secretariat; and the Strategic Council for Inter-municipal Development. CIM's are allowed to create technical and administrative support services, where their nature, structure and functioning are defined by rules adopted by the CIM Council under a specific proposal of the inter-municipal executive secretariat. CIM's have its own personal staff. Usually, CIM officials were transferred from the municipalities' own staff, favoring the general mobility rule, an administrative feature of Portugal's public sector. These workers are submitted to the rubrics of contract regime in public functions.

The CIM's have their own assets and its financial resources come from: (i) State Budget Transfers (equivalent to 0.5% of the transfer of the current Financial Balance Fund of each municipality member); (ii) Contributions from the CIM' municipalities; (iii) Transfers from municipalities exercising delegate powers; (iv) Transfers from the central government or other public or private entities; (v) EU co-financing amounts; (vi) Other subsidies, grants or contributions; (vii) Goods and services sales fees; (viii) Income from CIM own assets, the product obtained by the CIM assets' sale or rights assignment over CIM assets; (ix) Any income addition, fixed or periodic, that are attributed by law, contract or legal act; (x) Loans; (xi) Any other income permitted by law.

### 3. CONCEPTS OF DECONCENTRATION AND DECENTRALISATION

With the creation of the CIM's, there is an attempt to decentralise powers and competences.

Devolution can be understood as a deconcentrating process, in which certain decision-making powers are assigned to employees or subordinate agents. This process enters in a clear opposition to the main principles of a concentrated administration where the decision-making powers are only reserved to the higher levels of the public sector. Nevertheless, it is possible to make a distinction between "functional deconcentrating" and "territorial deconcentrating" in which the former occurs when the assigned powers are unique and the latter when these powers are distributed by various subaltern organs according to geographical areas. The territorial deconcentrating of the State Administration is aimed to exercise at the local or regional level a number of tasks (usually assigned to the central administration), by installing decentralised or peripheral services. However, there are no perfectly concentrated or fully decentralised system. In general, the administrative structures correspond to *mixed systems* sometimes closer, sometimes more distant from the "pure models" mentioned above.

The main advantages of a decentralised system are as follows: a) a closer Administration for individuals and businesses; b) increasing efficiency of public services, translated into faster response to requests and a better quality of services, since devolution promotes specialisation of functions either between design and management tasks or between operational execution tasks and the provision of services; c) best conditions for establishing public-public and public-private partnerships at local and regional level, favouring outsourcing and contracting of the exercise of administrative functions; d) adaptation of administrative and public services, in particular to where local and regional conditions are concerned.

On the other hand, deconcentrating also has its disadvantages: a) the loss of a national vision of the State Administration; b) dispersion and the proliferation of decision centers can cause increasing difficulties in terms of a coherent and coordinated approach; c) increase in spending on human and financial resources which is related with the multiplication of services; d) decrease in quality due to the shortage of good technical means and qualified human resources at local and regional level.

In legal terms, it is stated that a system is "*decentralised*" when the administrative role does not belong only to the central state but also to other local or regional authorities. Decentralisation has several important advantages such as follows: a) ensure local liberties, serving as the basis for a pluralistic system of public administration, which in turn is a way of draw some limits to the political power; b) ensure greater citizen participation in public decision-making; c) standardise governance, but, at the same time, allowing for local adaptations, so that it can be in line with the needs and interests of the population; d) diversify policies and resource allocation responses, contributing, at the same time, to the internalisation of democratic values; e) allow for proper management to the requirements of economic development in a global competition context, encouraging the exercise of citizenship.

Decentralisation has the following disadvantages: a) it may be inefficient in terms of network services, standardisation and routine; b) it may result in loss of control of scarce financial resources by the central government; c) it may result in less efficient and effective services, given the lack of administrative and financial capacity at local level; d) transfer of administrative responsibilities may not be accompanied by financial relocations, to meet new responsibilities, making equitable distribution and the provision of services more difficult; e) it can generate administrative incoordination.

### 4. REGIONAL DEVELOPMENT AND INTER-MUNICIPAL COMMUNITIES

CIM's allow for a supra vision of problems and solutions, and even if municipalities have different problems, one can state that those constraints tend to have a similar nature or typology. This way, municipalities can continue with their own policies. It is not intended that inter-municipal communities replace local action or that CIM assume the feature of a "super City Hall". The idea is to take advantage of these municipalities' agglomeration to generate economies of scale. CIM's allow a better management of EU funds, ex.

But the same law that created CIM's gives to these administrative bodies, a series of specific duties and responsibilities, which are similar to those of municipalities. According to this perspective, CIM's can be more than a mere management tool of EU funds.

One can identify the following potentialities associated with the CIM cooperation: (i) answering to the problems faced by the territories in a coordinated and organised manner; (ii) increasing action efficiency; (iii) personal involvement and personalised contacts that facilitate dialogue and actions' implementation, making it easier to make adjustments when necessary; (iv) increased

public awareness, which in turn improve citizens' participation; (v) improvement of local administrative practices, institutional capacity and functioning of municipal services; (vi) increased flexibility, less bureaucracy, less time to obtain results and to monitor cost evaluation of small-scale projects; (vii) increased capacity to respond to community problems, due to the fact that at local level it is easier to grasp the population needs; (viii) the long-term involvement, as the partnership continues even after the completion of the project; (ix) the possibility of networking and town twinning (at a multilateral dimension), allowing access to different levels of problem solving.

It is possible to identify a broad set of CIM' constraints: (i) the scarcity of financial and human resources that originates lack of projects' sustainability; (ii) the lack of coordination between departments carries out negative consequences in terms of effectiveness; and (iii) the insufficient awareness of both public, administrative and technical staff and political decision-makers who tend to ignore the meaning and the importance of cooperation for development. In order for the CIMs' to be able to meet their responsibilities, there should be a greater concern from the municipalities to overcome these constraints.

The inter-cooperation presents four important characteristics which must be taken into account to achieve improved performance with respect to regional development:

- 1) Primacy of the particular and specific (recognition that each region and each community has its own potentialities and problems; definition of development as a "bottom-up" multiple process and not as a result of centralised and uniform policies; and the action of local actors and the development of community resources should be the basis of this process).
- 2) Predominance of local actors' action and self-organisation (valuing local actors more than the instruments and policies; reinforce information, training and communication strategies; importance of coordination between local actors' initiatives and projects according to a perspective of interaction and synergies; and promotion of actors' self-organising strategies where initiatives, projects and joint projects are concerned).
- 3) Focus on the enhancement of regional and local qualitative resources (priority stimulus to professional qualification, research and innovation (link to higher local / regional education); give extra attention to entrepreneurship and to the so-called "spirit of enterprise", risk, experimentation, evaluation and monitoring of actions and initiatives; and emphasis on interactive relationships such as networks, communications or information).
- 4) Development perspective as a participatory and negotiated process (power transfer from central authorities to regional and local levels; increased initiative, organisation and representation of the community near the public authorities; and creating partnership habits).

The inter-municipal cooperation should encourage people's participation in the decision process, the distribution of benefits, sectoral diversification, and openness to other regions, technical innovation and promotion of territorial identity.

One can argue that CIM's will have an important role in regional development, as they aggregate local interests and needs, allowing for a more effective problem resolution. Although CIM's tend to be associated with the concept of regional development, the idea of local development should not be forgotten. By promoting regional development, CIM's also promote local development: in order to develop the whole (region) it is crucial to develop its components (local) and by developing the region as a whole, there are gains with respect to local development.

## 5. THE FUTURE OF CIM'S

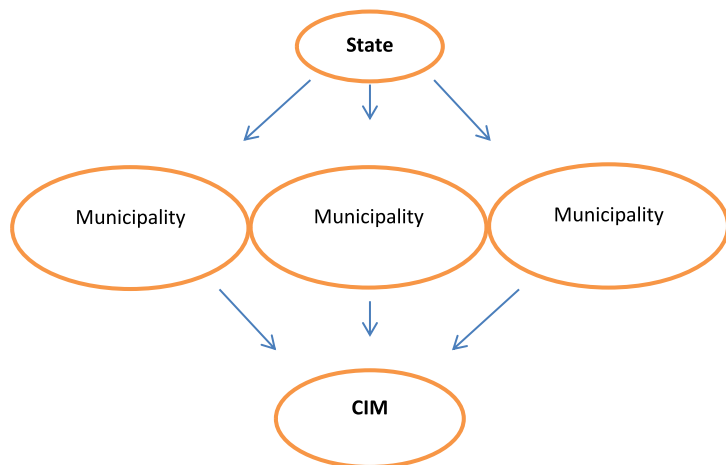
The enhancement of CIM's doesn't replace the crucial role that the Portuguese municipalities should continue to assume in the provision of most local services. The appreciation of CIM role should be in accordance with the principle of gradualism, focusing on one hand in improving action effectiveness (which currently constitutes its central core duties and responsibilities) and, on the other hand, in the adoption of power delegation mechanisms both from the central government and municipalities, as well as the corresponding contracting objectives and technical or financial resources.

In the definition of the functions to be performed by CIM's, the subsidiarity principle must be a reference, as economies of scale are best achieved at supra-municipal level. Proximity effects should also allow for a more suitable management. CIM's should be seen as the key catalyst actors in the territory development. This can be achieved by planning/promoting activities, strategic coordination and monitoring. This set of responsibilities should be developed in partnership with leading local institutions and in conjunction with the European, national and NUT II strategies (embodied in the "Europe 2020 - for Smart, Sustainable and Inclusive growth" strategy).

CIM's main problems are related to its operational model and its role in regional development. The local level appears to be more important than the regional level. There must be a balance between the two geographical scales, otherwise it will not make sense that CIM's exist. CIM's must not be seen as institutions where each municipality has or makes known to others their interests and their investment intentions. It is urgent to create a new operating model that will confer to CIM's a new role.

In the new operating model, CIM's must be managed by staff not directly connected with municipalities, although local governments and specific local interests must continue to be taken into consideration. This way, it will be possible to conduct true debates in order to promote regional development and to launch a real negotiation between the different interests. The current "state of affairs" can be translated into the following diagram:

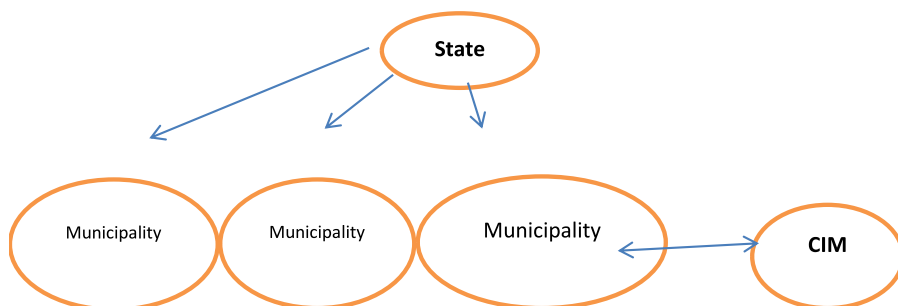
Fig. 3 – Relationship State/Municipalities/CIM



Source: Authors' own elaboration

Fig. 3 corresponds to what happens today, that is, the subordination of CIM's and regional development to local interests. The desirable new operating model is represented in Fig.4.

Fig.4 – New Model



Source: Authors' own elaboration

Through this working model, the involved entities would have valid reasons to justify its existence and change to true institutions with the aim of promoting regional development. The problem can be that municipalities may consider they will lose competences and see their interests neglected. It is not intended that CIM's assume the nature of a "great city" of sorts, but, on the opposite, it will affirm it selves as entities that pursue the development of a specific territory under the principle of equity

The need to change and reorient the CIM's action and *modus operandi* becomes even more relevant as there are some country' regions that face serious problems, such as aging population and less capacity to produce wealth (Ex: Portalegre district).

It is very important to raise awareness among municipalities' representatives to the goal of regional development. What is at stake is not some sort of a "facade" regional development but the joint construction of supra-municipal policies. In order to ensure its success, CIM's would have to be managed by actors not directly connected with local authorities, assessing regions as a whole.

**6. THE INTER-MUNICIPAL COMMUNITY OF ALTO ("HIGH") ALENTEJO**

The *Inter-municipal Community of Alto Alentejo* was established in 1992, being first designated as *North Alentejo Municipalities Association*. Between the end of 2008 and early 2009, the NAMA changed its name to CIMAA and started to benefit from EU funds.

CIMAA is a legal person of public law of associative nature and geographical scope and aims at achieving its municipalities common interests. CIMAA is mainly regulated by Law no. 75/2013 of 12th. September and by its Statutes. It comprises the following municipalities: Alter do Chão; Arronches; Avis; Campo Maior; Castelo de Vide; Crato; Elvas; Fronteira; Gavião; Marvão; Monforte; Nisa; Ponte de Sor; Portalegre; and Sousel.

The CIMAA area of action is of approximately 6,065 km<sup>2</sup>, the 6th largest Portuguese district, with a resident population of 118,952 inhabitants, according to Census 2011. Portalegre district has been suffering from four major negative conditions: loss and aging population; illiteracy and weak labor-skilled working force; high unemployment; and lack of wealth production capacity. The district presents economic traits that fit the profile of the Alentejo region: poor sectoral diversification; small size of companies; corporate resistance to association and cooperation; traditional production methods; and poor adoption of TIC's and innovation.

Fig.5 – Portalegre District



Source: [www.portalegredigital.biz](http://www.portalegredigital.biz)

The CIMAA mission is to promote and defend the common interests of the associated municipalities, boosting its integrated and sustainable development, enhancing partnerships, creating synergies and maximising complementarities. Its vision is based on the premise of seeking to be an organisation whose modern and innovative management practices allow to identify and meet the needs of the associated municipalities and develop strategies that lead to increased inter cohesion. Its main objectives are: (i) increase inter-municipal cohesion; (ii) promote and foster economic and social development in the region; (iii) make the most efficient and effective internal organization; and (iv) encourage participation in the decisions of the associated municipalities.

It should be noted that the main objectives CIMAA meet the main weaknesses of the Portalegre district, in order to mitigate them through a supra-municipal vision.

The bodies that constitute the CIMAA are as follows: Inter-municipal Assembly; Inter-municipal Executive Body; Inter-municipal Secretariat; and the Strategic Council for the Inter-municipal Development.

The Inter-municipal Assembly is the deliberative body and it is composed by members of the municipal assemblies, elected proportionally: three for each of Alter do Chão municipalities (Arronches, Avis, Campo Maior, Castelo de Vide, Crato, Fronteira, Gavião, Marvão, Monforte, Nisa and Sousel) and five for each of the municipalities of Ponte de Sor, Portalegre and Elvas.

The Inter-municipal Executive Board is the governing body and it comprises the mayors of each of the municipalities, which elect between them a president and two vice presidents.

The Inter-municipal Secretariat is concerned with the design, implementation and coordination of the technical and administrative bodies in the areas of planning, cooperation, organization, modernization, management, evaluation and control. It is up to the organisational structure to develop all activities in support of the corporate bodies considered to be adequate for the Community tasks and competences. The general objectives of the organisational structure are as follows (with similarities to the other CIM): (a) to participate in the management of regional development support programs; (b) to elaborate studies, analysis and preparatory surveys to support decisions and deliberations of the Community bodies; (c) to support the CIM bodies in relationship' policies and institutional cooperation, both at national and international scale; (d) to propose strategy measures to each of the functional areas; (e) to support CIM bodies in implementing its guidelines regarding the management of their human, financial and patrimony resources; (f) to collaborate in the development of financial and administrative resources and to evaluate its implementation; (g) to prepare and submit to higher approval the instructions, norms, regulations and other legal dispositions consider to be necessary for the activities and tasks; (h) to support the municipalities in its new competences and attributions; (i) to coordinate the management of material resources, in order to promote its optimization in the technological, patrimonial and financial dimensions; (j) to ensure the coordination and integration of internal information systems; (l) to ensure the legal, technical and administrative support for the Community Bodies and municipalities, including commissions, working groups and project structures that work within the Community; (m) to organize, process and analyse statistical and documentary information related to matters that have interest for the Community; (n) to perform other functions of technical and administrative nature.

The Strategic Council for Development is a body of advisory nature, build for support the decision-making process of other administrative organs and is composed by the representatives of institutions, entities and organisations with inter-municipal relevance.

In order to exercise its duties, the CIMAA has at its disposal the following areas (dimensions):

- a) Administrative and Financial (financial services, human resources and legal support, institutional cooperation – acquisitions central (SCI / CC); administrative modernisation and new technologies).
- b) Development and Regional Planning (planning, regional development, environment and tourism; cartography and GIS; training, education, culture and sports).
- c) Administrative Support.
- d) Office of Coordination and Management of Alto Alentejo: it provides support for INALENTEJO Management Authority, as established in the Global Subvention Agreement.

The services that comprises the organisational structure and integrated staff act are guided by the following principles: a) pursuit of the objectives set by the Community bodies; b) offer public services to municipalities and populations; c) flexible management; d) participation and accountability; e) coordination and cooperation between administrative bodies; f) rationalisation of resources.

Throughout its existence, the CIMAA has developed a significant number of projects. One can highlight the following: (i) – The Territorial Development Program (2007-2013); (ii) The Alto Alentejo XXI Platform; and (iii) The Territorial Development Strategy of the Alto Alentejo 2014-2020.

The *Territorial Development Programme (PTD) 2007 - 2013* built a strategic vision for the time frame 2007-13, taking advantage of a thoughtful and discussion process promoted by AMNA. The PTD is a synthesis of the results achieved with this strategic building process, the consistency and compatibility of the measures and the structural interventions to be developed.

The document is structured into four major points. The first shows the positioning and prospects for the Alto Alentejo. The main conclusions are as follows: need to boost the tourism sector; heritage and historic centers conservation; enhancement of the landscape and environmental resources and cultural and sporting activities; offer of agricultural quality products.

Points 2 and 3 present, respectively, the “Vision and Strategic Options” and the “Action Plan”. The main axis are as follows: enhancing the attractiveness of the region as a “good to live” territory; promotion and qualification of entrepreneurship and enhancement of natural and endogenous resources; give sustainability to a territory of environmental excellence for tourism; opening new territorial boundaries of development; and good government of the territory (building an effective regional governance network).

Alto Alentejo Platform XXI project was the most prominent initiative of CIMAA. It was established as a discussion platform that promoted opportunities for debate, gathering opinions which resulted in a final document that defines the development strategy for the Alto Alentejo, leading to an Integrated Operation of Development (OID), financed by the CSF 2014-2020. The debates with the participation of specialists in the areas concerned, at local and national level took place between 26 January and 28 June 2012. The proposed topics for discussion were the following: Mobility and Transport; Health, Social Support, Security and Civil Protection; Education, Training and Qualification; Water and Wastewater Public Networks; Solid Waste; Tourism; and Economic and Social Development / Job Creation.

From this cycle of debates it was prepared a strategy paper entitled "Platform Alto Alentejo XXI: The future of the region in debate - Debate Cycle conclusions." Some documents were made available ("Streamlining Plan for the Alto Alentejo Social Economy"; "Inter-municipal Plan for the Promotion of Alto Alentejo accessibility "Strategic Plan for Alto Alentejo Sustainable Mobility"; "Strategic Plan for Water and Solid Waste Sectors in Alto Alentejo"; and "Alto Alentejo Tourism Operational Plan - 2014-2020"). Basically, the strategic documents were created around the subjects discussed in the Alto Alentejo XXI Platform, and each examines a specific topic.

The “Territorial Development Strategy of the Alto Alentejo 2014-2020” is the successor of the “Territorial Development Plan 2007-2013”. In this paper the constraints and challenges for 2014-2020 are presented: a response to the effects and demands of an aging population; strengthen economic competitiveness through foreign investment attraction; enhanced support for investment through higher levels of co-financing and new financing instruments; promoting employment and social inclusion, in particular of active inclusion, through effective coordination between the relevant sectoral policies and institutional partnerships; the implementation of strategies that take into account the territorial specificities; and the achievement of targets set by Portugal in the context of Europe 2020, in its National Reform Programme, through territorially differentiated approaches that take into account the current regional disparities.

In this context, five priority areas of intervention were established: a) Territorial Qualification; b) Innovation and Skills Training; c) Investment attractiveness and restructuring of economic activities; d) Local Development (Low Density Territories / Border zones); e) Strategic Governance Network. This document then translates what the action plan should take into account, during this time period.

Much has been discussed about regionalization and the Inter-municipal Communities issues. At a first glance, it is possible to assess that the CIMAA is a very important institution for the region development, as in the manner it was created: CIM's have the potential to establish themselves in local, regional and national spectrum as agents of development. Unfortunately this is not what actually happens in what territorial administrative structures are concerned.

Taking into account the objectives of CIMAA, one can draw some conclusions. It has helped to increase cohesion, because it facilitates dialogue and cooperation between municipalities, but there is a shortage of supra-municipal policies. As for the second objective, the attempt to promote Portalegre economic and social development, it is undeniable, but there's a difference, or better saying, a long distance, between “promoting” and “accomplishment”. The projects are the mirror of this statement. There are, on one hand, the projects that have an enormous theoretical value, but on the other hand, do not shown great practical value. The latter is mainly due for one part, because its preparation lies on the municipalities and, for another part, one must take into consideration that the initiatives worked more like a list of investments previously outlined by municipalities, rather than something truly innovative. It is therefore documents which are an aggregation of the specific interests of each municipality, because in spite of holding debates and dialogues, each local body wants to promote its own territory, in clear detriment of a true regional development spirit. It is not like the municipalities and their representatives do not want to promote regional development, but by giving priority to local, it is clear that the regional dimension remains in a weaker position. Even so, one can argue that regional development does not entirely “lose”, because with local development, regional development suffers, in a way, a positive influence. Relatively to the objectives no. 3 and 4 little or nothing there's to say, as these objectives have been in fact fulfilled, which brings us once again to the second objective, perhaps the most important to be able to analyze the role of CIMAA.

With regard to EU funds, of which CIMAA is the beneficiary, it is considered that they contributed to the economic and social development of the Alto Alentejo. The problem lies on the action of CIMAA in the design of innovative policies. As CIMAA is made up of representatives of municipalities - and not by individuals outside the local government structures -, its strategies directly reflect the strategies of municipalities. CIMAA presents itself then as a "platform" where each municipality takes part, in order to take the greatest possible advantage of cooperation to benefit themselves, rather than be a supra-municipal guidance, to think the region as a whole. If one looks at the projects developed by CIMAA, it is possible to perceive cooperation and dialogue between the municipalities that comprise this supra-municipal body; but “behind the curtain”, representatives of municipalities basically are more concerned with obtaining the best for their territory, which means they are more interested in promoting local than regional

development. Each municipality has its own interests, and does not exist in its midst a "voice" off of local interests, which might see the region as a whole.

CIMAA is a mere "space" where there is a simple aggregation of interests and investment intentions. In addition, CIMAA does not present itself as a body able to influence the decisions of the municipalities in order to promote regional development. In this context one can argue that it is more of an organ that might dictate "false" guidelines. We used the word "false" because it is not really the CIMAA that builds the guidelines but the municipalities themselves.

CIMAA works as a self-effacing platform where municipalities just get their policies validated.

In practical terms, its existence is justified only due to the EU funds, as it can "save" some administrative work to municipalities and, at the same time, be the recipient of the said applications.

## 7. FINAL REMARKS

The Inter-municipal Communities were created in order to promote regional development. But what is currently verified - by analysing the case of the Inter-municipal Community of Alto Alentejo -, is that these structures don't accomplish the role for which they were created. It is possible to generalise for the whole CIM's the main conclusions derived from the Alto Alentejo study case.

One can detect the existence of a set of both internal and external pressures, which contributed to the CIM's emergence: (i) the need to break some isolation felt by some municipalities; (ii) the need for a broader horizon than that of a single municipality; and (iii) common problems and difficulties whose resolution requires concerted cooperative action. Another most relevant factor towards inter-municipal cooperation was the condition that municipalities could only jointly submit to EU funds, as a NUT III configuration is needed in order to be eligible. Only due to this pressure inter-municipal association and cooperation was roused.

In short, the dynamic role that the CIM may come to exercise in strengthening regional cohesion, in terms of economic growth and sustainable development is recognized. Priority should be given to the efficiency of public management and greater transparency in the management, not forgetting the rationalization and reduction of running costs through economies of scale, while at the same time maintaining the provision of quality public services of proximity.

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