



MOVING
MOUNTAIN VALORISATION THROUGH
INTERCONNECTEDNESS AND GREEN GROWTH

Policy Brief

BETIC SYSTEM | Organic Olive Oil



Photo credit: Antonio Zafra



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Betic System: Organic Olive Oil

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Summary

The olive tree is a crop with a long tradition in Andalusia. It has a notable presence in the mountainous areas of the interior of the provinces of Jaén and Córdoba. The characteristic traditional management of these crops involves steep slopes and high varietal diversity. In recent decades, organic and designation of origin certification schemes have been used in an attempt to compensate for the high production costs and inherent management difficulties of the mountain olive oil value chain.

Betic mountain systems have seen a constant increase in the production of olive oil certified as organic over the last two decades. Together with others that may be tried, these strategies can alleviate the risks of abandonment of crops in mountain areas with steeper slopes and mechanisation difficulties. They can contribute to the development of more sustainable agricultural policies and the fight against climate change.

Know more about the Betic Systems Reference Region, its selected value chain and the regional multi-actor platform (MAP), [here](#).

Key policy messages

- Promotion of organic production
- Monitoring and measures to combat land abandonment and sustainability loss
- Active policies against depopulation and social crisis
- Valorisation of rural traditions
- Strengthening landscape identity
- CAP as a driver of sustainable agricultural production

1. The Mountain Reference Region (MRR)

The Betic mountain ranges are one of the main relief groups in Spain. They extend for more than 600 km along the south-southeast of the Iberian Peninsula, subdivided into the Prebetic, Subbetic, and Penibetic mountain ranges. The south of Cordoba is a geographically and geomorphologically representative unit of the Cordilleras Béticas. Cordoba is one of the provinces with the largest area of mountain olive groves. The Organic Mountain Olive Oil Value



Chain encompasses a wide range of interlinked activities and functions, from the cultivation of olive trees and the tasks associated with the production of olives, their processing into olive oil, distribution, marketing, and distribution to the final consumer. Other associated aspects are related to the maintenance of the soil, biodiversity, and landscape. Different by-products obtained throughout the value chain give rise to new compost or energy products.

Spain ranks first in Europe in terms of organic farming ([EUROSTAT](#), 2019), while Andalusia represents 45.06% of the total area under organic agriculture in Spain. The national area dedicated to organic olive groves is 222.722,96 ha ([MAPA](#), 2020), 88.691,16 ha of which are in Andalusia. We can say that the south of the province of Córdoba, where the Sierras Subbéticas Cordobesas Natural Park is located, contributes a significant part of the province's organic olive groves. The three municipalities selected for the value chain (VC) analysis occupy the centre of the mountain spur. Carcabuey and Priego de Córdoba are part of the [Priego de Córdoba Olive Oil Designation of Origin](#), while Zuheros is included in the [Baena Olive Oil Designation of Origin](#). The organic cultivation of olive groves is combined with the traditional system features, sometimes with difficulties of accessibility and mechanisation. Mountain olive groves have a notable presence in these municipalities, distributed on steep slopes and at altitudes of between 400 and 1 000 metres. The effects of climate change, significantly associated with reduced rainfall and temperature changes, together with the problematic management of traditional mountain olive groves, sometimes provoke the abandonment of crops, and in other cases, ploughing and the shift from traditional management systems, with the loss of biodiversity of local varieties and other environmental impacts.

2. Mountain olive groves, between survival and ecological regeneration

Olive growing, alone or in association with other crops, has been an important economic activity in the Betic mountain ranges in recent centuries. In the last years, the organic mountain olive oil sector has grown notably in terms of certified production. It generates a qualification of organic olive oils representing an added value in the market. In the processing sector, the three municipalities offer contrasts. Other synergies are taking place as new products are being developed based on collaborations between different sub-sectors.

The three municipalities have a high potential to take advantage of the mountain's attractiveness, as a complementary value for developing sporting, cultural and gastronomic activities. This is also associated with the high number of local varieties of olives, which contributes to the production of olive oil with very particular sensory characteristics. The cultivation of mountain olive groves is also associated to a great extent with the abandonment of plots at higher altitudes for extensive sheep and goat farming. This abandonment also contributes to a decline in the pressure of cultivated land. The result is that the natural



environment finds optimal conditions for the recovery of habitats adapted to the flora and fauna conditions typical of this mid-mountain area.

Despite this, in socio-economic terms, competitiveness of traditional mountain olive groves is under serious threat. Outstanding challenges related to this VC are linked to the achievement of: greater interest by producers in innovative systems; greater coordination among producers; the development of processing chains and specific products under organic certification; reference to local varieties of olives and mountain cultivars; the opening of specific marketing channels; synergies with other sectors such as culture, the environment, and tourism; adaptation to climate change; technical improvements; and capacitation in regenerative agriculture.

3. Value chain contribution to sustainability and resilience of the Mountain Reference Region: barriers and opportunities

The challenge of keeping the mountain olive grove alive lies in the non-productive functions carried out by this crop. Thanks to this, it contributes to shaping the high landscape and heritage value areas and maintaining the vitality of rural areas by creating employment and being a source of economic wealth for farmers who manage more than 200 000 ha in Andalusia. On the other hand, mountain olive groves generate environmental public goods by maintaining biodiversity, slowing erosion, reducing water pollution, or being relevant to climate change mitigation or fire prevention. At the same time, in the context of the search for alternative solutions to the survival of this low-yield olive grove, organic production is proving to be an interesting option to consider. On the one hand, because of the price differential between organic and conventional oil. On the other hand, because the management of organically produced olive groves is better adapted to the conservation of the environment and aims to increase the supply of public goods by agriculture. In particular, the Sierras Subbéticas olive grove is an element that contributes to defining the identity of a unique landscape, as reflected in its inclusion in the nomination for inscription on the UNESCO World Heritage List.

In the Sierras Subbéticas Cordobesas [Natural Park](#) and [UNESCO Geopark](#) agriculture, livestock have always been integrated with the management of the mountain ecosystem. However, the abandonment of cereal and legume crops in higher altitude areas, the decrease and simplification of livestock farming, and the current evolution of the olive grove, which is more closely linked to the mountain, mark a trend to which only an innovative process can provide resilience against climate change and other critical risks.

4. Policy relevant considerations

Organic olive farming can contribute to the conservation of mountain ecosystems, protecting soils, biodiversity and generating social, cultural and economic benefits. It adds to existing



quality certifications, including Protected Designation of Origin (PDO), other quality schemes and recognitions linked to the territory, ecology, diversity of varieties, or the articulation of the sector. Rural development support schemes from the European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development (EAFRD), articulated in Andalusia through the [Rural Development Programme 2014-2020](#), include two measures aimed at supporting organically oriented mountain farming in olive groves as well as encouraging the conversion and maintenance of organic olive grove practices. The survival of the traditional European olive grove requires urgent conversion for agronomic and ecological reasons. [The European Common Agricultural Policy \(CAP\)](#) has an important role to play in this respect, as does national and regional policy, which in Andalusia includes a Master Plan for olive groves ([Junta de Andalucía, 2015](#)).

Different accompanying measures (training, research, etc.) have been tested in this regard, but it is undoubtedly the implementation of the support measures or incentives derived from the CAP that represents the most coherent alternative. Anticipating and monitoring their impact, as well as experimenting with other policy initiatives are some of the tasks guiding this reconversion. At the same time, analysing how the sector itself and the territory can become involved with positive responses is essential too. The relevance of the proposed case is thus linked to the integrated European approach that recognises the importance of mountain olive groves in many areas of southern Europe.

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