MOVING
MOuntain Valorisation through INterconnectedness and Green growth

Policy Brief

CORDILHEIRA CENTRAL | Serra da Estrela PDO cheese

Photo credit: Elvira Sales-Baptista

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Serra da Estrela PDO cheese "Cordilheira Central"

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Summary

Grazing in altitude pastures could be expected to link the Serra da Estrela PDO cheese to the mountain area. It has done previously. This PDO cheese is a highly valued product and is often considered as a development asset. Yet, socio-economic changes have led to a decrease in shepherds and sheep, and a move of summer grazing to lowland pastures, as well as a consolidation of family-based sheep producers into larger factories, and a fleeting connection between the value chain and the territory that gives it its name.
The depopulation and abandonment of the territory have led to shrub encroachment in previously grazed pastures, increasing fire risk, and a loss of the mosaic landscape and biodiversity value. Reconnection requires an integrated strategy that considers development, pastoralism, conservation, and fire risk management objectives. Cooperation among the six municipalities is crucial to establishing open paths, prioritising areas for intervention, and harmonising forestry and pastoralism practices.

Figure 1: Serra da Estrela sheep in common pastures on the central plateaux of Serra da Estrela

Key Policy Messages

- ☞ PDO products can be disconnected from their production territory and PDO branding does not secure the territorial assets related to the product
- ☞ Incentives to pastoralism require integrated policy approaches – forestry and agricultural – that perceive the territory as a whole
- ☞ Extensive pastoralism sustains important services in mountain areas beyond provisional

1. *Serra da Estrela PDO cheese and the mountain that gives it its name*

Cordilheira Central is a mountain range that extends over 700 km across the Iberian Peninsula. In Portugal, it forms its most important mountain range - Serra da Estrela. The landscape is diverse and influenced by human activities together with its biogeological characteristics. It holds high biodiversity, protected under Natural Park, and is a popular tourist destination. Still, depopulation and abandonment of the territory have been leading to shrub encroachment on previously grazed areas, loss of the mosaic landscape and of important habitats, with increased fire risk.

Serra da Estrela PDO Cheese is made exclusively with milk from autochthonous sheep breeds, produced in extensive or semi-extensive regime. Grazing in altitude pastures used to link the value chain of the PDO cheese to the mountain landscape, but the production area extends well beyond the mountain area, to include lowland pastures in distances up to 30 km from the Mountain range.

PDO certification is made at the cheese factory level. Socio-economic changes in the last decades have reconfigured the cheese value chain from a family-based operation, where men shepherded and women made cheese, to larger factories that buy milk from multiple milk producers. With a declining population, there are less shepherds and sheep, shepherds are scattered, and with increased availability of lowland pastures, transhumance is disappearing.

This PDO cheese is described in planning and strategy documents as the most important territorial asset of Serra da Estrela and is often sported as a key product for territorial development, with an increasing market value.

2. Value chain contribution to resilience and sustainability

Rural fires are a growing concern, and maintaining an open landscape mosaic is fundamental to contain fire risks and extreme fire events. Shepherds and sheep, through grazing and other clearing actions have been important actors in maintaining pastures and thus the landscape open. The historic connection and use of autochthonous breeds, well adapted to the Serra's pastures and terrain, created until a few decades ago, obvious synergies between the PDO cheese value chain and the territory. What is missing is acknowledging the landscape role of sheep grazing, related compensation schemes and creating an enabling environment for shepherds to continue to use altitude pastures.

Serra da Estrela cheese is a well-known and valorised product. Historically has been an important economic activity in the territory and production and demand trends, seem to indicate that it can continue to do so. There has been a trend of consolidation of the value chain, and larger cheese factories can dominate the market. There have been efforts by the producer associations and other entities for joint market strategies, but smaller cheese producers can have a harder time selling their product at a fair price. The value chain can create jobs and wealth for the territory, but would likely benefit from mechanisms that better redistribute the added value along the chain.

3. Policy experiences

The PDO contributes to the preservation of autochthonous breeds and traditional knowledge, specified in the code of practice. However, since the PDO area includes lowlands and the availability of lowland pastures has been increasing due to declining crop production, its connection to the mountain area is weakening as transhumance declines. Currently, the PDO certification does little for the resilience of the mountain territory that names it.

The mismatch between the potential and actual contribution of the PDO does not go unnoticed. The municipality of Seia, one of the six within the Natural Park of Serra da Estrela (PNSE) and one of the 18 within the PDO production area, started in 2020 to support transhumance. This meant annual cash support for those participating in the transhumance party. This connected the practice with tourism but also led a few shepherds to resume transhumance activities. This action involved identifying and talking with shepherds, as well as with landowners and commons to find suitable

pastures and create access paths. A small committed network emerged, led by the municipality officers. This initiative is still ongoing, and the municipality has recognized its relevance, increasing support each year.

The PNSE has been an important institution operation in the territory, contributing to the recognition of priority habitats and the integration of conservation networks. It was an important partner in the valorisation of the cheese, recognizing its relevance and connection with the territory. Nonetheless, the current sectorial policy approach lead to a separation of conservation and agriculture, and thus of forestry and pastoralism. This has created tensions between the PNSE and residents and producers, namely concerning buildings and their restoration with the park area. Support infrastructures are crucial not only for transhumance (such as shepherd's shelters), but also for the establishment of production units at medium altitude.

4. Recommendation for future policies

It is needed to reconnect the cheese value chain with the mountain area to preserve and revitalize altitude pastures and their characteristic landscape in Serra da Estrela. This can be achieved through direct incentives for transhumance, encouraging shepherds to use altitude pastures by implementing mechanisms like “altitude surcharges” or payment for results.

Yet, this should be within an integrated strategy that considers development, pastoralism, conservation, and fire risk management objectives. A landscape-based strategy for the entire mountain territory is crucial, moving beyond sector-specific policies and individual municipal efforts. An integrated approach should include:

- Integration between forestry and pastoralism: Most altitude pastures fall under the jurisdiction of the Natural Park or commons associations, which are primarily forest-focused, creating barriers to grazing. Harmonizing forestry and pastoralism practices is necessary to ensure these pastures are accessible for grazing, and thus maintained as open pastures.
- Territorial cooperation among the six municipalities in Serra da Estrela: Ensuring open paths for shepherds and animals to move within the mountain is crucial. Municipalities must collectively decide on priority areas to keep open, develop a network of paths and services, and establish market integration strategies. This cooperation will facilitate the movement of people and livestock, reducing land abandonment and encroachment.
- Dedicated compensation schemes that compensate shepherds for the ecosystems services they provide: habitat preservation, fires risk control, landscape quality.

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