

## **Neo-Rural settlements in continental Portugal: Threats and opportunities for rural planning.**

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### **Abstract**

The Portuguese countryside has been witnessing the emergence of new land uses as part of a transformation process that affects its physical, functional and symbolic features. In this context the housing vocation of rural areas is debated on the grounds of counterurbanization and of a new back-to-the-land movement that seeks to develop new forms of human habitat - associated with new lifestyles and aspirations for community, contact nature and responsible consumption - that configure a wide spectrum of diverse proposals for creating a sustainable future.

The geography, diversity and main issues of neo-rural settlements in continental Portugal is the focus of this research, taking from the works of Keith Halfacree and others. 'Neo-Rural Settlement' is the term given to the spatial expression of this back-to-the-land movement, an emerging dynamic that land-use planning and management should take in consideration in order to enhance their contribution to the regeneration and development of rural areas, and also prevent its possible risks and threats.

An extensive mapping and classification of neo-rural settlements in continental Portugal is presented, along with a classification based on data collected through the internet (cyber-mapping). These results were tested and further developed through case studies, which enlarged the knowledge with subjective elements like the motivations for migration, everyday lives and the challenges that neo-rural settlers face. The relationship with the administration is one of the major challenges, and was explored through the perspectives of both neo-rural settlers and local government planning officials, revealing opportunities and threats that call for a greater involvement and collaboration between both sides.

These results start a discussion about the challenges neo-rural settlements pose current to land-use planning and management practice, such as how to enhance creativity and social innovation of these bottom-up initiatives, without abdicating the duty to safeguard the collective interests.

The constraints to an efficient handling of this process by the administration come from the lack of knowledge of the phenomenon and the inadequacy of the instruments available within the legal framework, which encourages an avoidance and dropping-out attitude that increases the risks. Some possible solutions for overcoming this problem are proposed, taking inspiration in a recent Welch policy, and exploring the needs for political and legislative measures, along with more engaged research, in order to produce an appropriate set of legal mechanisms and tools for dealing with neo-rural settlements.

**Keywords:** Neo-rural settlements, Counterurbanization, Cyber-mapping, Planning policy.

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### **1 Introduction**

In the late 20<sup>th</sup> and early 21<sup>st</sup> century a fringe of society in the Global North is moving back-to-the-land experimenting new technologies and social organization systems that combine tradition and innovation in the development of a more sustainable habitat and lifestyle (Halfacree, 2007). This paper presents an exploratory research of this new back-to-the-land movement in Portugal. This emerging dynamic throughout much of the global North, is comprised within counterurbanization (Berry, 1976, in Mitchel, 2004) and rural gentrification, and takes inspiration from the transition towns, ecovillage and permaculture movements, expressing itself through various bottom-up initiatives that seek local solutions to global problems. These individuals find in rural areas a test field for trying and developing more sustainable lifestyles as a way of meeting their individual needs of identity and freedom, as well as political and spiritual motivations. In this

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outlook of counterurbanization cases in Portugal, the city is the center from which cultural and political innovations are diffused, through migratory flows motivated by both practical and symbolic reasons.

The first goal of this study was to produce an extensive mapping and classification of back-to-the-land initiatives in Portugal. Taking the web as the primary search field, the research explores the geography of new settlements that area closer to the concept of *radical ruralities* (Halfacree, 2007). The qualitative-quantitative methodology was based on discourse analysis of the web-based communication employed by the developers and members of these initiatives, and in a selected set of indicators for classification. The pooled sample of 100 cases reveals internal diversity in terms of land use patterns, motivations for the migration and lifestyle choices, as well as in the daily lives of its members. The representations of the concepts of ecology, economy and community revealed significant differences between the cases, reflecting more or less depth in the understanding of sustainability, both on a cognitive and practical level. These representations and the locality of the developments were gathered and different types were identified through cluster analysis. Finally, the geography and characteristics of the four identified types - Eco-Business, Eco-Lifestyle, Centros de Convergência and Intentional Communities - were analyzed and mapped revealing clear patterns of settlement in rural Portugal.

The sample gathers cases of low impact developments that emerged in response to the economic crisis, but also others that point to a deeper cultural shift in Western society. The more *radical ruralities* found in the sample express - in their locality, representations and daily lives - a longing for freedom and self-determination of urban populations with higher education and cultural capital, that feel dissatisfied with contemporary city life, and that don't find in urban areas the space or the resources to create and experience an alternative lifestyle that resonates with their values and needs.

The countryside emerges as an economically accessible alternative, where the longing for a sustainable lifestyle can be practiced in close contact with nature, and the connection to Life can be experienced, in contrast with the rat-race of city life. Therefore, back-to-the-land in Portugal could be better named as a forward-through-the-land movement, as it lays out clues to what may be some of the evolutionary trends of the physical form and cultural life of cities and regions in the future..

## **2 The theoretical framework for studying Neo-rural settlements**

The theoretical and geographical borders of urban and rural in the Global North have been hard to trace since the 1970's, after the shift from traditional to industrial forms of agriculture the very concept of the urban-rural divide has been questioned by geography and social sciences. Nonetheless the rural world has popular significance and remains an active research domain (Woods, 2011) even when the land is not dominated by peasants and agriculture (Domingues, 2011). Current trends to rural geography follow post-modern and post-structuralist approaches that step away from the structural features of rural space, to enhance the various ways in which individuals and institutions map and define rural space (Woods, 2011). In this approach rural space becomes a virtual reality projected onto the land, a social representation of space.

Halfacree's (2007) three-fold model of rural space – that integrates the rural locality, the representations and daily lives of rural populations - was the basis for the study these *radical ruralities*, an alternative scenario for the post-productivist countryside. The multifunctional approach developed by Holmes (2006) was also taken into consideration in the study, since it provides a framework for the classification of the projects by the way they combine production, consumption and protection functions in land-use and design.

### **2.1 Neo-rural settlements in the context of Counterurbanization**

In order to include all the diversity of projects within the alternative neo-rural settlements while, at the same time, targeting common features the conceptual framework provided by counterurbanization (Berry, 1976) was an important contribution. Berry presents this concept as a migratory process, as well as a process of settlement change that tends to produce a reconfiguration of settlement patterns. The causes for these migrations come from a complex interaction of economical reasons, changes in cultural preferences of society, social policies (welfare led migration) and transport infrastructures that allowed increasing commuting distances.

Within counterurbanization studies there have been many different approaches, from statistical studies on a national scale, to study-cases in rural localities or focusing specific social groups, encompassing different scales and diverse perspectives. The evolution in counterurbanization studies displays a shift from trying to establish typologies to the analysis of counterurbanization narratives (Mitchel, 2004). The motivations for counterurbanization flows, particularly the anti-urbanization ones - the voluntary migration of urban populations longing to live and work in less densely populated areas in close contact with nature – offer a

conceptual framework that better targets the object of research. In a study on Greek counterurbanization, Gkartziou (2013) develops the concept of crisis counterurbanization, as a new back-to-the-land migration from Athens as a consequence of the decreasing quality of city life in result of the austerity policies.

## 2.2 The role of the state in rural planning

Current state regulation of rural space is developed mainly by sectorial policies, mainly the agricultural, environmental and land use planning policies. Through these policies the State plays an active role in the production and reproduction of formal representations of rurality, and also in its physical and functional features, affecting the structure of rural economy, the settlement and land-use patterns, and through them, the whole rural landscape and the quality of life of rural populations (Woods, 2011).

The direct intervention and the set of legal tools and mechanisms available for local governments to manage rural areas through land-use planning is although limited in the Portuguese case, preventing the State from having a relevant role in the social and economical dynamics that support rural development, when its legal powers focus only on promoting or preventing urban development, managing infrastructures and enforcing zoning regulations and environmental restrictions.

Local governments, unable to regulate a real-estate market driven by financial investments, tend to encourage gentrification as a way of increasing tax revenues on which they depend. *Radical ruralities* try to go against this trend of economic growth, aiming at localization and de-growth, disregarding zoning regulations and restrictions – as the land suited for development is too expensive or unfit for the type of development they seek - threatening the control of the administration and competing with other populations and activities for access to land.

Even in depopulated and economically depressed rural areas, where *radical ruralities* could have many positive impacts, local governments have no legal tools or mechanisms within the planning system to allow such developments. Therefore, the only alternative to the strict control and enforcement of rigid regulations is a combination of tolerance and complicity that weakens planners and politicians, in relation to the hierarchy.

## 3 Methodology and Case Study

### 3.1 Methodological approach

In order get a scope of the geography of some alternative developments whose characteristics fit within Halfacree's (2007) *radical ruralities* an extensive cyber-mapping based on web search was developed. A set of networks connected to alternative social movements was selected for the search as a way of targeting these alternative developments and bringing them out of the complexity and diversity of contemporary rural space. In order to present an inside view of these *radical ruralities* a discourse analysis of the information gathered online was developed focusing on the locality, representations and daily lives of its residents. This methodology doesn't have the depth of a field inquiry and doesn't allow testing and refutation of the information. Therefore the aims of this cyber-mapping were merely to produce a first sketch map and an outlook at the geographical scope and diversity of cases in rural Portugal. By intentionally targeting the *radical ruralities* these method ignores other realities (material, imaginary and experiential) of contemporary Portuguese countryside that compete or cooperate with the object of research for access to land and resources, public and institutional recognition or, in other words, for the right to exist. The following figure displays the stages of the information gathering method:

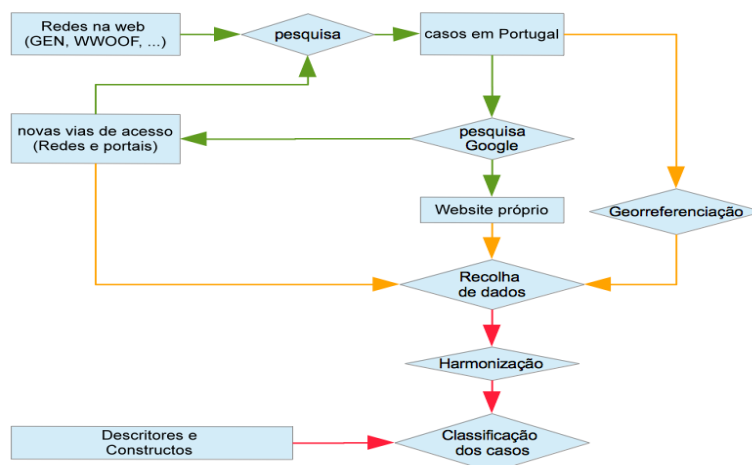


Figure 1 - Flow-chart of the data collection method

With the aim of identifying different types of neo-rural settlements within the sample a set of constructs was developed for classification. These constructs reflect the representations and practices of each case along the concepts of ecology, economy and community, interpreted through discourse analysis of the web based communication. The score of each case within the constructs shows a gradient of positioning from mainstream to more alternative or radical representations and practices, like shown in **Error! Reference source not found.** This information was later used to classify the sample through cluster analysis.

Axis	Categories			
	1	2	3	4
<b>ECOLOGY</b>	Not relevant (3)	Commodified nature (26)	Shallow ecology (23)	Deep ecology (48)
<b>ECONOMY</b>	Profit as goal (3)	Urban' job in 'rural' space (31) *	Eco-economy (33) **	Local self-sufficiency (4)
<b>COMUNITY</b>	Not relevant (11)	Participation in local community (41)	Active building of community ties (32)	Building and living in community as the main goal (16)

Table 1 - Constructs and categories for describing the representations and practices of each case

### 3.2 Case studies

In order to test and deepen the results of the cyber-mapping a field inquiry was developed in a selected study area, the SW coast of Portugal, chosen for the density and diversity of cases and the accessibility to some of them. Interviews and direct and participatory observations were developed in four study cases comprising three of the four settlement types identified in the cyber-mapping. The interviews followed were mostly made up of open ended questions is specific topics covering the description of the interviewee (his/hers migration trajectory, education and professional skills, and other demographic data – who are they and how do they live) and the project (reasons for the chosen location, livelihood, organizational structures among other topics), the networks in which it participates, how they relate to the administration and with surrounding populations, representations of the rural locality and worldview.

With the aim of integrating the perspective of administration two planning officials in local governments of the study area were interviewed, following the same method of open ended interview with topics covering the representations of rural space, neo-rural settlements and settlers, how they relate with the administration, how they see the relationship of these new settlers and the local populations, and the issues they find in trying to integrate these settlements in the planning system. The recorded interviews of both planners and neo-rural settlers reached a total of seven hours and were partially written.

## 4 Results

### Cyber-Mapping

The information gathered was mapped revealing a majority of cases (73%) whose accurate location was not available. The diversity of the developments was described according to the different types of projects offered by the Welsh One Planet Development Policy, with two adjustments: the land base enterprises were extended in order to include also services (health and tourism), and there was a need to create an extra type for including projects located in existing rural settlements. This information is shown in Figure 2.

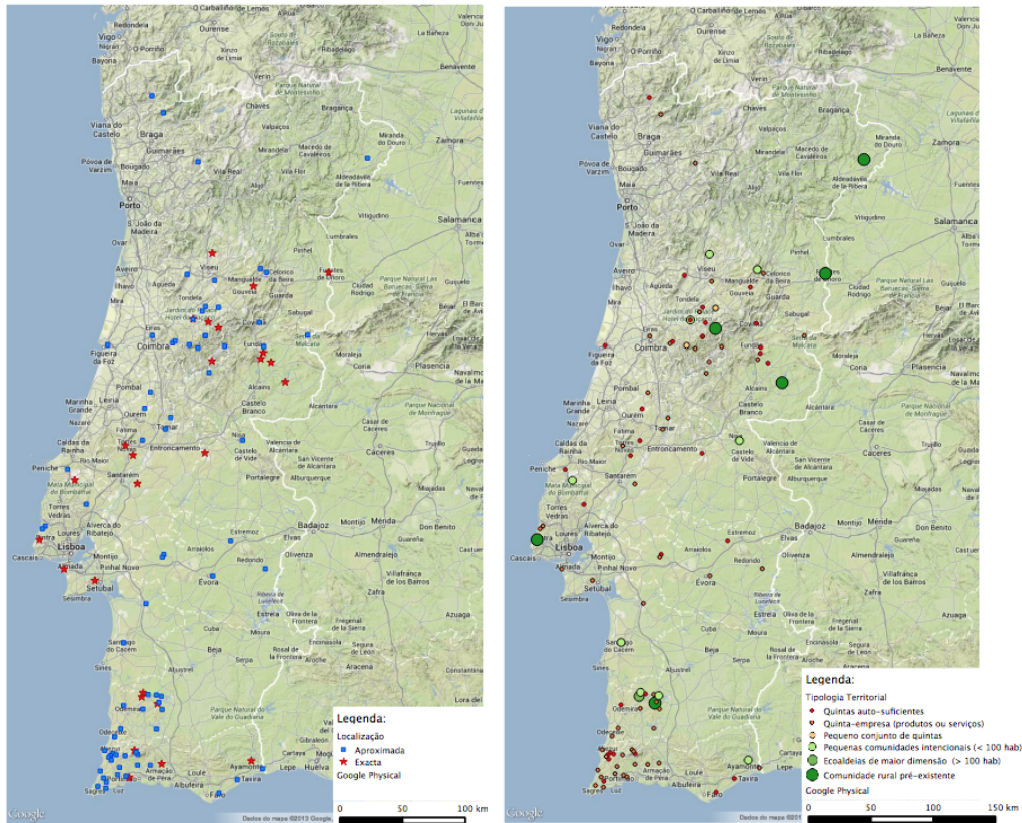


Figure 2 - Sample mapping, location (left) and type of development (right).

The cyber-mapping revealed a majority of settlements developed by foreigners, concentrating in the SW region and around the Estrela mountains, in central Portugal, as shown in Figure 4 (left). The evolution in the number of cases shown in Figure 3 displays an increasing growth rate starting in the early 2000's.

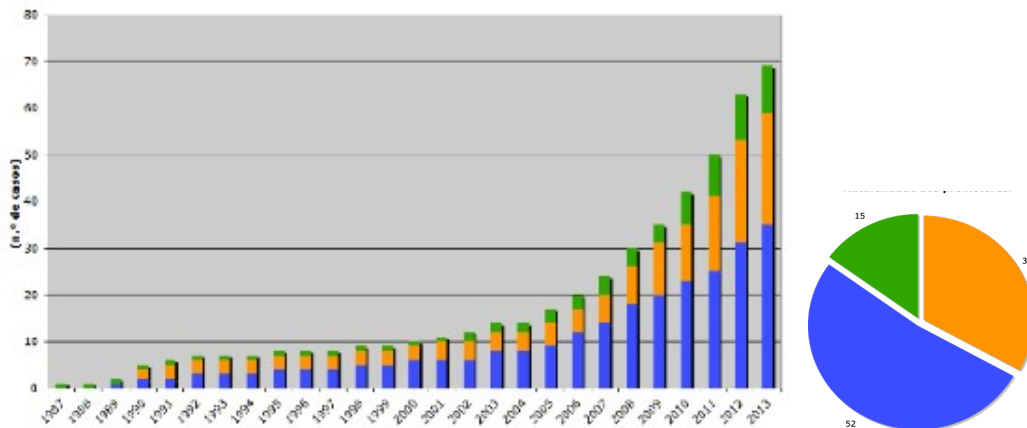


Figure 3 – Evolution of the developments by origin of its members (Portuguese, foreigner, or mixed) and global percentages.

The classification of the developments according to the Welsh policy, along with the scores in the constructs were used to classify the sample through cluster analysis, as they together reflect the three dimensions of rural space according to Halfacree's (2007) model. The analytical statistics describing the clusters are shown in the next table

Cluster	Count	ECOLOGY		ECONOMY		COMMUNITY		OPD TYPE	
		Av.	Std.Dv.	Av.	Std.Dv.	Av.	Std.Dv.	Av.	Std.Dv.
Eco-lifestyle	42	3,810	0,397	3,095	0,656	2,690	0,680	1,500	0,552
Eco-business	41	2,220	0,571	2,268	0,571	1,927	0,721	1,780	0,419
Convergence Centers	6	4,000	0,000	2,333	0,516	3,000	0,000	6,000	0,000
Intentional Communities	11	3,727	0,467	3,136	0,778	3,909	0,302	4,000	0,447

Table 2 - Analytical statistics of the clusters

The two biggest clusters were called Eco-lifestyle (1) and Eco-business (2) and they correspond to multifunctional farms and land base enterprises that show more alternative or more mainstream representations and practices, reflected in the constructs scores. The cases of Eco-lifestyle show a prevalence of the productive function that contrasts with the Eco-business cases where the consumption function is dominant. The cases of Eco-lifestyle also show a more radical positioning in their representations of ecology, economy and community when compared to the more mainstream narratives of the Eco-business cases. Although separate in theory the frontier between these two clusters is blurry and they both fade into each other as some cases show slight differences in physical features as both display multifunctional combinations of consumption, production and protection activities. Since the most significant differences come from their representations and practices, which can change, these two clusters can be seen as one cloud of cases that spreads between two poles of ideological preferences, with more mainstream approaches on one side and more radical proposals on the other.

Clusters 3 and 4 are a result of the classification of their locality and display a more radical positioning in the space of the constructs, like shown in Figure 5. These clusters include the Convergence Centers (3) – local development projects in existing rural settlements – and Intentional Communities (4) which are mainly new developments on open countryside with a physical and social design that serves a communitarian lifestyle.

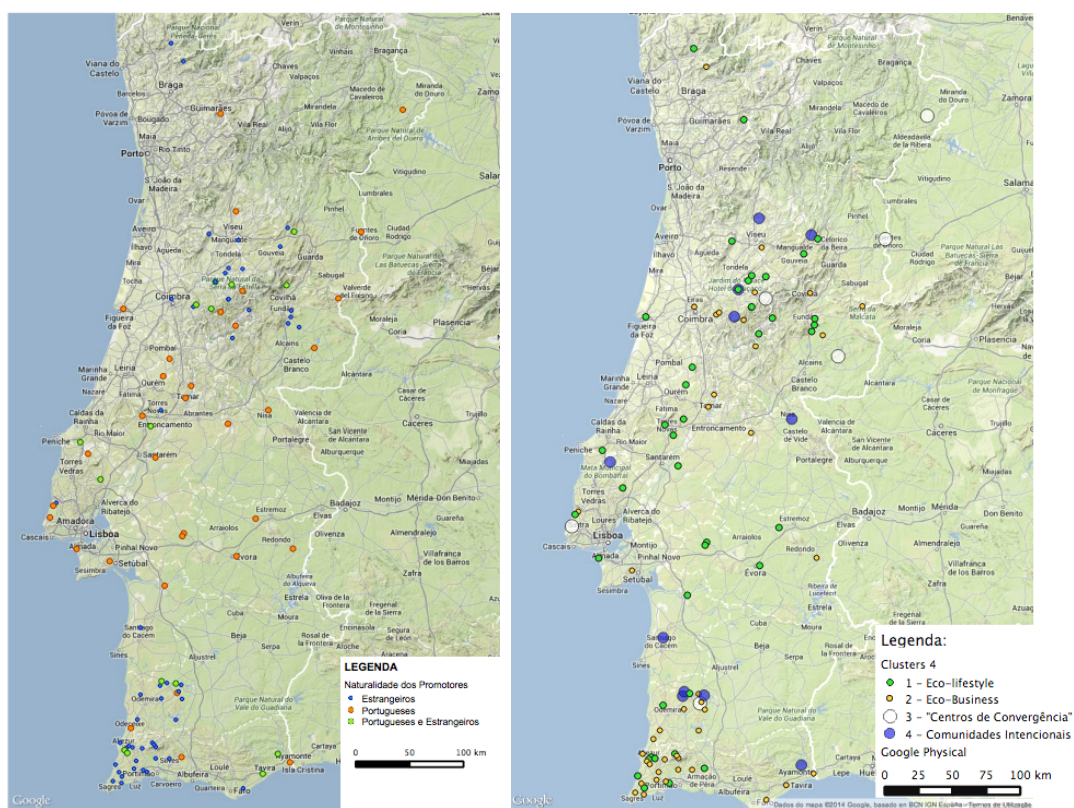


Figure 4 – Location of the developments by origin of its members (left), types of development identified through cluster analysis (right)

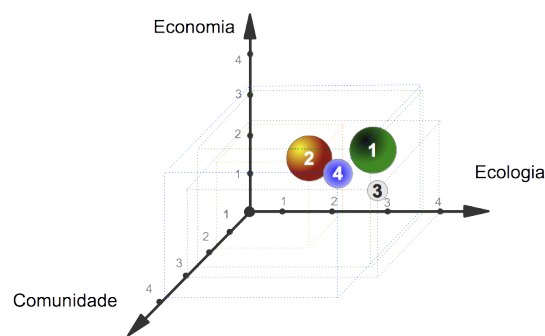


Figure 5 - Clusters positioning in the three dimensional space of the constructs

## Field inquiry

The results of the field inquiry show that the knowledge and understanding of neo-rural settlements by the planning officials is still insufficient. The representations of rural space by both municipalities corresponded to the formal representations coming from the regional policy level. The representations of neo-rural settlers were generally positive with the exception of some forms of *radical ruralities* known to one municipality for violating zoning regulations and therefore regarded with concern (one of these cases is an intentional community that was also interviewed in this research). In general terms the planning officials are open to these migratory flows and see the opportunities that an increase in number and diversity of local populations opens for rural development. None of the interviewees referred any conflicts between neo-rural settlers and local populations and both think that the integration of the newcomers happens naturally. When asked about the issues concerning the integration in the planning system the official in Odemira city hall mentioned the fact that the legal instruments don't welcome these alternative developments and the need to study them further and assess what can and cannot be accepted, while also warning about the need of the neo-rural settlers to compromise.

The information gathered through interviews to neo-rural settlers reflects common anti-urbanite motivations, fears about law enforcement by the administration and different kinds of challenges that each project faced or is facing regarding its financial sustainability, and legal acceptance of their developments, built structures and lifestyle. The case of Várzea da Gonçala in Aljezur municipality shows a trajectory from Eco-lifestyle to Eco-business confirming the hypothesis of a blurry frontier between these two clusters. The two intentional communities referred fears about legal action from the administration and the challenges of internal organization as well as the need for clearer communication with planning experts – since they feel their positive contributions are not known or considered in a licensing process. The interview to Centro de Convergência (cluster 3) revealed the challenges of organizing a functional collective project aimed at promoting local development but without enough funding, the different life-stages of the project and its evolution through interaction with the local rural community. It also expressed very clearly the obstacles that current planning regulations procedures and practices pose to many neo-rural settlers in the surrounding area, such as: poor geographical information (zoning maps), rigid procedures that don't allow reasonable exceptions, and the illegal building on open countryside as the only way of some populations having access to the land when its prices are over-inflated by speculation over the development rights. The many connections of the study cases to local, national and international networks is a strong feature of these initiatives and shows the engagement with society – although critical to its course – and reveals the general political attitude of these populations involved in what Halfacree (2007) called “constructive green politics”.

## 5 Discussion

Taking Halfacree's (2007) *radical ruralities* as a target one can clearly say that the majority of the cases in the cyber-mapping sample, and all of the study cases, correspond to its definition. The strong presence of permaculture principles shows up directly and in the deep ecology and social ecology ideals in their worldview, as well as in the daily practices of land based activities. The networks that form between some of these projects and society reflect the openness of this new back-to-the-land movement as identified by Halfacree (2006) in contrast with the trend witnessed in the 1960's. These connections have economic significance for these developments through the goods and services they provide to society. The narratives collected online or through interview express an increasing responsibility of these populations in exploring more resilient lifestyles, reducing their ecological and carbon footprint, and working together in the development of a sustainable culture.

According to Fairlie (2009, in Halfacree, 2011) these cases are mainly lifestyles, since their livelihood is not mainly derived from land-based activities such as agriculture, forestry or cattle farming. Nonetheless the development model of all the study cases and much of the cyber-mapping sample resembles Low Impact Developments (LID), although this development model is not included in Portuguese law and therefore not allowed to be tested. This is the challenge that neo-rural settlements pose to the state, to open the possibility for the trial by space experiments of new development models with a high resilience and low ecological footprint as goals. This trial by space approach, by acknowledging the experimental nature and eventual transience of these developments, is extremely relevant in preventing rural gentrification (Smith, 2011) and real-estate speculation, while assuring that the development follows strict environmental criteria monitored by clear indicators. In the absence of such an approach these *radical ruralities* might evolve into more mainstream un-ecological practices, or attract real-estate investors who would use the legal breach to

explore this emerging rural housing and tourism market. According to Halfacree (2007a) this scenario would correspond to the failure of these *radical ruralities* in producing a differentiated rurality in contrast to the spaces induced by the profit seeking logic of capitalism.

The following table synthetizes the main threats and opportunities of neo-rural settlements for land-use planning in rural setting

<b>THREATS</b>	<b>Subversion of the Planning System</b>	Basic zoning regulations and restrictions	
		Proliferation of furtive 'eco' developments	
	<b>Rural Gentrification</b>	Increase in land prices by higher purchase power demands	
		Exclusion of local populations	
<b>OPORTUNITIES</b>	<b>Aims and goals</b>	<i>Bottom-up</i> development of a sustainable culture and resilience practices	
		Ecological lyfe-style, localization, degrowth, frugality	
	<b>Rural regeneration potential</b>	Landscape regeneration and ecosystem restoration	
		New actor and networks	
		Hubs of import/export of knowledge, goods and commodities	
	<b>Inovation and diversification</b>	of the development models	<i>Ruralidades Radicais</i> (Halfacree, 2007a)
			Paradigmatic multifuncionalidad (Covas, 2008)
		of the social fabric	National and foreigner populations, global urban culture
			Different age cohorts (children to retired pensionists)
		of the economical fabric	New activities, products and services, new demands and new markets
Endemic innovation: integration of local heritage (values and resources, folk and practices)			

## 6 Conclusions and suggestions for further research

In a context where the rural-urban divide is quite blurry, the conceptual framing of the neo-rural settlements is provided by counterurbanization, as an expression of both anti-urbanization (Mitchell, 2004) and crisis counterurbanization (Gkartzios, 2013), that reflects deep cultural shifts in society in response to the challenges brought by current crisis (economical, social and environmental). This research tried to explore the geography of these neo-rural settlements, analyzing the diversity of its features and explore the opportunities and threats that it poses to rural land-use planning and management.

The extensive cyber-mapping of the new back-to-the-land movement revealed an expressive number of projects in Portugal both in online networks and in the land. The qualitative-quantitative methodology was based on discourse analysis of the web-based communication employed by the developers and members of these initiatives, to select a set of indicators for classification. The pooled sample of 100 cases reveals internal diversity in terms of land use patterns, motivations for the migration and lifestyle choices, as well as in the daily lives of its members. The representations of the concepts of ecology, economy and community revealed significant differences between the cases, reflecting more or less depth in the understanding of sustainability, both on a cognitive and practical level. These representations and the locality of the developments were gathered for the identification of typologies. Finally, the geography and characteristics of the four identified types - Eco-Business, Eco-Lifestyle, Convergence Centers and Intentional Communities - were analyzed, revealing a gradient from mainstream to more radical developments, and mapped using GIS to reveal clear patterns of settlement in rural Portugal where the SW coast and the Estrela mountains in central Portugal show the highest density and diversity of settlements as well as of foreign populations. The numbers of these developments have been growing through the last decade with a higher rate since 2008, which might be explained by the combination of economic factors (austerity policies) and cultural trends.

The study cases are examples of *radical ruralities*, with a development model close to LID that supports a more sustainable and resilient lifestyle. Nonetheless these developments is not internally accepted by the



existing legislation, which challenges the state to allow experiments to take place in the countryside in line with Halfacree's (2007) Trial by Space approach.

This is one of the main challenges and contributions that neo-rural settlements pose to the administration regarding land-use planning and management, because it requires from the bureaucratic administration a strengthening of its communicational skills, along with a more opened, flexible, cooperative and educational attitude. The back-to-the-land'ers are themselves encouraged to engage in open communication and cooperate with the administration, developing their knowledge of planning and their critical self-appraisal

In this sense the Welsh OPD offers an important policy framework to rethink rural planning that nevertheless doesn't apply directly to the Portuguese context for the lack of discretionary powers given to planners in the administration, the rigidity of the zoning regulations and the fact that planning decisions are bound to strict regulations and procedures. Therefore, current land-use planning policy and practice presents the biggest obstacle some *radical ruralities* already implanted on site, and to their role in local development strategies where their capacity to innovate and diversify local culture and economy with their cultural capital and extended social networks.

In the current legislation the concept of non-permanent development is not considered, assuming that all developments are permanent and will stand on the land for eternity, even if the buildings need maintenance or replacement after decades the development rights are kept in the land and have an economical significance that cannot be overthrown – blocking other less profitable land uses such as agricultural production or environmental protection. This system doesn't allow for the fast adaptations required by an experimental development model or, in a time of accelerating changes in society, economy and environment, all developments could be regarded as trials.

The emergence of neo-rural settlements in Portugal calls for a more engaged reporting and studying by academia and monitoring from the administration, in order to produce precious information about the social and technical skills required for a more sustainable lifestyle, about prevention of environmental risks. To engage planning in a truly scientific practice requires the possibility of trial and error approaches that encourage co-evolution of developments and land use practices through the interaction of citizens, planners and policy makers. For this to take place the concept of non-permanent or experimental development needs to be established in the planning system, as a way of safeguarding risks, abuses and threats, and promoting an adequate balance of state control and individual freedom for innovation in contemporary society.

Public participation is another area where the inclusion of neo-rural settlements could bring developments, since the permaculture skills promote a responsible and active role of the citizens involved, a productive dialogue that can go beyond the selfish rent seeking requisitions of landowners, who make up the majority of the participants in planning processes up to date. The very role planners must extend beyond the bureaucrat and enforcer of regulations to a more active role in seeking creative alternatives that translate the needs of the citizens into acceptable solutions for the planning system.

Neo-rural settlements, or low impact developments, bring the focus of the debate back to the social importance of land-use planning, to its role in seeking answers to the challenges facing contemporary society at the economic, social and environmental level. This emergence also demands the strengthening of the connections and cooperation between citizens, land-use planners and academics for the production of alternative knowledge, skills, practices that can shape the evolution of human habitats towards sustainability.

*back-to-the-land in the twenty-first Century can be seen as engaging directly to varying degrees with the diverse life challenges facing us in this new millennium* (Halfacree, 2006)

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