

A FOCUS ON... STAKEHOLDER INVOLVEMENT

REPORT

Participative Management of Community Forest in Soria (Spain)

Through the project 'Montes de Socios' (Forests of the People), the Province of Soria (Castilla y Leon) has been at the forefront of efforts in Spain to re-engage the owners of largely abandoned forests to create a model of sustainable management for the 21st century. The process has involved the creation of new laws, hours of research on land ownership rights and the creation of autonomous local management groups providing a new impetus to rural development through effective stakeholder engagement.



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A COMPLICATED HISTORY

To understand the Montes de Socios project, its challenges and its achievements, it is essential to understand the history that led to the general abandonment of hilly forest land in many areas of Spain.

In Soria, a "Monte" is not so much a "mountain" as an area of land associated with hills, forests, bushes and lowland grazing - it is generally land unsuitable for agriculture.

In the 19th century, large parcels of hilly forest land were auctioned off by the State to raise funds, following rounds of confiscations, which saw the expropriation of land

from monasteries, municipalities, military orders, hospitals and hospices. Around 100 000 hectares were put up for sale during the two years 1866-7 alone.⁽¹⁾

The confiscation and selling off of this land not only impacted on the institutions affected, but on the many poor villagers who used the municipal commons for their subsistence. In many cases, they joined forces to try to buy the land so they could continue to use it. The land was not sold off cheaply or below the market rate, so the effort undertaken by villagers was considerable, involving sacrifices, loans and years of hard work to repay debts.

“Buying the land was not easy. It was a lot of money at the time. Most people really struggled. Some sold their animals cheaply to get the money they needed, others effectively gave up their rights to harvest timber for 40 years. They just kept the right to use the pasture and to gather the wood they needed to build houses and for firewood in the home.”

Cándido Moreno, President, Monte Pinar Management Collective, Herrera de Soria.

For more than 80% of the forest sold in Soria, the shared sacrifice created a shared spirit that saw joint ownership and joint management of the forest through co-operative-style arrangements. The co-purchasers had indivisible rights to the land, ensuring its management through co-operation and making use of the forest resources to support the local community.

THE LOSS OF A CULTURE

However, the handing down of the land from generation to generation and important social changes that led to significant migration to towns and cities by people in search of new opportunities made successful management of these uncultivated hilly forests increasingly difficult. Who wanted to work the land? Who owned it? Whose responsibility was it?

Even where efforts were attempted to organise the effective exploitation of



The landscape of the project areas is characterised by hills, trees and relatively poor quality soils.

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forest resources, the legal framework did not make it easy. Trying to establish legal ownership or management rights was too costly and complex to be practical for most rural families or communities. The forests were largely abandoned, damaging the ecosystems that had developed and increasing the risk of forest fires. In Soria, 25% of the total forest area was abandoned – around 150 000 ha.

The tendency was for local authorities to take over ownership and responsibility for land that had been largely abandoned. However, as the Mayor of Ladrado (Soria), Revilla Jiménez, points out: “These lands were bought by our ancestors. They belong to the people, there’s no doubt about that. Why should the local authorities lay claim to them?”

“It was not right or fair that these lands, which were bought with so much effort and sacrifice, and which belonged to the villagers fell into public ownership like that, without any questions. We decided to try to identify the rightful owners and call on them to protect this territory give a new impulse to rural development in the area.”

Pedro Medrano, Technical Director, Soria Forestry Association v

A NEW LEGAL FRAMEWORK FOR JOINT MANAGEMENT

Management of the land had in many cases become impossible. The first and essential step for resolving the situation and re-enabling development of these rural areas was the creation of a new legal framework.

The Forestry Association of Soria promoted legislative change, which led to an amendment of the national law on these forest landscapes in 2003.⁽²⁾ This change provided for the legal establishment of Forest Management Collectives to make effective joint management of hilly forest areas under shared ownership practical once more.

The first step for the formal constitution of a Forest Management Collective (Junta Gestora) is to obtain accreditation that the forest area belongs to at least ten different people with indivisible rights to the territory. In the absence of current title deeds, ownership can be demonstrated through a documented link from the original owners to current claimants.

(1) Following civil confiscations under the Madoz Law (Ley Madoz) of 1855.

(2) Disposición Adicional 10, Ley de Montes 43/2003, Spain.



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Landowners came together in often large numbers to form the new collectives.



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Signing up to the new management collectives typically takes place in quite formal ceremonies.

The process is overseen and controlled by the respective Forestry authority for each Autonomous Community in Spain, which also undertakes to publicise the creation of a Forest Management Board.

TRACING OWNERSHIP OF THE LAND

Identifying the current owners of the land was not a simple task. There were records from official sales that took place in the 1860s, but the passing on of land might

have been recorded with local authorities, local associations or only via the handing down of documents within families.

All and any archives and sources were used to trace ownership from the original purchasers to people alive today. Hundreds of hours of research were undertaken, scouring through the records to find the rightful heirs to the land. Many were still living in Soria, but others were living in different parts of Spain and even further afield.

“ We knew that my father was from a village in Soria... But my father lost all contact with the village when my grandparents died. ”

Elías Pascual, an elderly landowner, living in Argentina

Elías Pascual lives in Argentina and had no idea that he was the rightful heir to shared ownership of forest land in Soria. He is emotional about re-establishing the connection with the land through the Management Collective: “Above all, it’s the satisfaction of keeping the family memory alive, and of my grandfather who was one of those who bought the forest land with so much effort.”

The result of the research was extensive ‘genealogical trees’ that identified as many of the current owners as possible. It was the groundwork that enabled the creation of Forest Management Collectives across the forest territory of Soria.



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Management of the land had, in many areas, been abandoned over the years.

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The story of Herrera de Soria

Herrera de Soria is a municipality of Soria covering 1 364 ha. It was sold by the State in 1905 and bought by 44 villagers who formed a collective to ensure they could maintain their way of life. Effective management of the land was seriously affected by the exponential growth in families with rights to the land descended from the original owners and processes of migration away from the municipality. Research by the project found more than 400 owners with indivisible rights to the mountain land today. In 2007, 11 direct descendants of the original 44 purchasers were the first to sign the agreement to create the Management Collective to provide for the effective management of the forest land.

ESTABLISHING JOINT MANAGEMENT OF THE LAND

Once the criteria for establishing a Management Body have been established and accredited by the relevant forest authority, the legal procedure concludes with the convening of the co-owners in a meeting to formally approve and sign the creation of the Management Collective. Under the Montes de Socios project 26 such Forest Management Collectives were established.

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The collectives have helped recreate a sense of community in many locations.

Modern technologies have been used to enable the participation of landowners who are not physically present in the territory or cannot attend meetings of the Management Body. Everyone is encouraged to have their say in the way the forest is managed and the rural community supported

THE BENEFITS OF JOINT MANAGEMENT

The benefits of stakeholder involvement in creating the Management Collectives have been economic, environmental and social. They have provided a new impetus for effective and sustainable management that extracts value from the forest in harmony with local biodiversity.

The process has played an invaluable role in reconnecting people with their rural roots and creating a new dialogue between all the people with a shared connection to mountain villages, regardless of their age and where they live now.

Involving stakeholders has been the essential pre-condition for ensuring effective and sustainable management of the forest resources and providing a new dynamic for rural development in Soria.

The reality is that being identified as a landowner today is not a path to riches; each person typically has a very small share in the value generated by the mountain. The value of the process comes from enabling important reinvestment in

the rural community. Many Management Collectives are already planning the use of the money produced from the forest to repair houses, improve roads, create new services and offer support to new families to come to the rural villages.

“That’s how it always was. The money made pays for the electric lighting, it pays to bring running water to the houses, it pays for the building of schools and roads. It is money of the village, invested in the village.”

Cándido Moreno, President, Monte Pinar Management Collective, Herrera de Soria.



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The participative management of community forest has now spread to other locations in Spain.

FOR FURTHER INFORMATION

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