



## **Forest Intervention Areas (ZIF): a new approach for forest management in Portugal**

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Portugal is the EU eighth country with more forest and other wooded area cover by surface area. However, it is also at the top of the EU countries most affected by forest fires. Several factors have been launched as possible causes, namely arson and negligence, which has been combined with harsh climate, steep slopes and a weakened rural context, characterized by depopulation and ageing, forest mismanagement, farmland abandonment and absence of an effective spatial planning.

Forest fires of 2003 and 2005, which were particularly severe and intense, highlighted the need to restructure the legal and institutional setting of forest management in Portugal. These events proved to be very harmful, not only for the socio-economic context, but also in terms of desertification, soil erosion, loss of water supply and losses on soil organic matter.

The EU funded DESIRE project (1) aimed to establish promising sustainable land management (SLM) conservation strategies in several areas throughout the world affected by desertification, promoting joint work between scientists and local stakeholders. Forest fires are one of the major causes of desertification in Portugal and Mação and Góis municipalities were selected as DESIRE study sites. The decision support methodology developed under DESIRE was based on the notion that stakeholder participation in decision-making will develop more legitimate, effective and successful decisions. The reduction of burned area was the goal defined in the Portuguese stakeholder workshops and the Forest Intervention Area (ZIF) was selected as the needed approach towards SLM.

The aim of this communication is to present the outline and context of ZIF approach in Portugal and to explore the social perception over the success or failure of this approach at Mação municipality. ZIF is a territorial unit where the main land use is forestry. This approach assembles and organizes small forest holders and defines a joint intervention for forest management and protection. Each ZIF of private forest has to include at least a contiguous area of 750 ha, 50 landowners and 100 forest plots, and has to be managed by a single body, defined by ZIF members. This approach aims to increase forest management, reducing fire occurrence, and to improve productivity in forest areas, contributing to rural development. From 2005 till now, 143 ZIF were published, representing more than 735,000 ha organized in ZIF and corresponding to 8% of national territory and to 21% of the total forest in Portugal. However there is still a giant step to be given towards implementation.

A survey (2) implemented to national and local stakeholders and also to a sample of the local community demonstrated the consensus around problems that affect forest sector at Mação, where forest fires were the most mentioned issue. Until now, five ZIF were published by law for Mação municipality. ZIF approach was recognized by all the stakeholders, included in the survey, and by half of the respondents from the community. The initial enthusiasm about this approach and its potential is fading due to the absence of effective implementation of measures and actions within a ZIF area.

(1) DESIRE Project (037046): Desertification Mitigation and Remediation of land – a global approach for local solutions, EU-funded project (2007-2012; <http://www.desire-project.eu/>).

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