

TransformMed

Transforming the Mediterranean Region through Agroforestry

Report on the Learning Route in Portugal



Anne Bouwmeester, Fernando Sousa (Dryland Agroforestry Center)

Marco Trentin (FiBL France)

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Introduction

TransforMed (Transforming the Mediterranean Region through Agroforestry) is an interdisciplinary and multinational initiative that promotes the large-scale adoption of agroforestry systems (AFS) as a solution to the environmental and socio-economic challenges affecting Mediterranean landscapes. Operating across Europe, Morocco, Tunisia, and Türkiye, the project seeks to demonstrate how context-adapted agroforestry practices can restore degraded and saline lands, improve soil health, enhance biodiversity, strengthen climate resilience, and support sustainable rural livelihoods.

Recognising that agroforestry adoption is often constrained by technical, economic, policy, and cultural barriers, TransforMed adopts a multi-actor approach that actively involves farmers, researchers, advisors, policymakers, civil society organisations, and local communities. Through co-creation and knowledge exchange, the project aims to develop practical and locally adapted solutions that can be replicated across diverse Mediterranean contexts. The project builds on the experience of established agroforestry “lighthouse” sites in Morocco, Tunisia, and Türkiye, which serve as demonstration and learning hubs for innovation and landscape restoration.

Within this framework, a learning route was organised to facilitate peer-to-peer exchange, expose participants to successful agroforestry initiatives, and strengthen collaboration among project partners and stakeholders. The Portuguese learning route focused on the Montado and other innovative agroforestry systems that have demonstrated long-term ecological, social, and economic viability under Mediterranean conditions. Portugal offers a particularly relevant learning environment due to its extensive experience in managing multifunctional agroforestry landscapes that combine agricultural production, livestock grazing, biodiversity conservation, and ecosystem restoration.

From 3 to 9 May 2026, participants from Europe, Morocco, Tunisia, and Türkiye visited a range of farms, enterprises, research initiatives, and community-led projects across Portugal. The programme explored diverse agroforestry approaches, including silvopastoral Montado systems, syntropic agroforestry, regenerative agriculture, carob-based value chains, and innovative policy instruments such as Results-Based Management (RBM). Through direct engagement with farmers, practitioners, researchers, and local stakeholders, participants examined both the opportunities and challenges associated with implementing agroforestry in Mediterranean environments.

The learning route aimed to:

- Showcase economically viable and environmentally sustainable agroforestry models operating in different Portuguese contexts;
- Facilitate knowledge exchange between practitioners and project partners from different Mediterranean regions;
- Explore practical strategies for improving soil health, biodiversity, water management, and climate resilience through agroforestry;
- Discuss enabling policy frameworks, governance mechanisms, and market opportunities that support agroforestry adoption;

- Strengthen collaboration and networking among participants to foster future partnerships and joint initiatives;
- Reflect on how lessons learned in Portugal could be adapted and transferred to the diverse socio-ecological conditions represented within the TransforMed project.

The insights gathered throughout the week highlighted the diversity of pathways towards agroecological transition while revealing common challenges shared across Mediterranean regions, including land degradation, water scarcity, biodiversity loss, labour constraints, and the need for more supportive policy frameworks. At the same time, the visits demonstrated the significant potential of agroforestry systems to reconcile environmental restoration with productive and economically viable land management.



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Abbreviations

AFS	Agroforestry Systems
CAP	Common Agricultural Policy
CARES	Center for Agroecology and Regeneration for the Semi-Arid
CMG	Casa Mendes Gonçalves
E410	Carob Bean Gum (food additive code E410)
EU	European Union
ICNF	Instituto da Conservação da Natureza e das Florestas (Institute for Nature Conservation and Forests)
IF	Industrial Fareense, LDA
LDA	Limitada (Portuguese equivalent of Ltd./Limited Company)
MED	Mediterranean Institute for Agriculture, Environment and Development (Institute at the University of Évora)
PRIMA	Partnership for Research and Innovation in the Mediterranean Area
RBM	Results-Based Management

1. First day of the learning route, 4th of May 2026

1.1 Visit to *Herdade de São Luís*

The learning route began with a visit to Herdade de São Luís, a 700-hectare organic farm located in Montemor-o-Novo, in the heart of the Alentejo Montado landscape. Managed by Francisco Alves, whose family has owned the estate for five generations.

The estate is characterised by a diverse topography, including flat areas, steep slopes, scrubland, watercourses and varying tree densities. The vegetation cover is dominated by cork oak (approximately 70%) and holm oak (around 30%), typical of the traditional Montado silvopastoral system.

Francisco presented a management model that combines principles of regenerative agriculture, holistic grazing and traditional silvopastoral practices. Central to this approach is the understanding that soil health is the foundation of the entire production system. Management decisions are therefore guided by three main objectives: maintaining permanent soil cover, minimising soil compaction, and avoiding soil disturbance.

Livestock are used as active land management tools rather than solely as production units. Through carefully planned rotational grazing, animals contribute to vegetation control, nutrient cycling and soil regeneration. Grazing is organised through paddocks of controlled size using movable electric fencing, allowing short grazing periods followed by predetermined recovery intervals.

A visual planning chart is used to record paddock occupation, resting periods and livestock movements. This planning tool enables adaptive management according to seasonal conditions while ensuring sufficient recovery time for vegetation and soils.

Francisco explained the complementary ecological functions of different livestock species:

- Cattle contribute to soil regeneration and maintenance of vegetation cover.
- Sheep help compact and structure the soil surface.
- Pigs scarify the soil, incorporate organic matter and control brambles.
- Goats selectively browse shrubby vegetation, reducing scrub encroachment.

The farm currently manages approximately 200 cattle (Portuguese breeds, Angus and Blanc Bleu Belge), 120 Merino sheep, 100 Serpentina goats and 40 Alentejo sows. In addition, around 20 hectares of forage crops, including millet, sorghum, sunflower and legumes, are cultivated to supplement grazing resources during periods of lower pasture availability.

Francisco emphasised that livestock production is conceived primarily as a vegetation management tool, reducing dependence on machinery, fertilisers and other external inputs. According to his experience, active management of grazing and pasture recovery can effectively replace many conventional interventions while reducing operational costs.

The visit also highlighted the importance of tree management in Montado systems. Cork oak (*Quercus suber*) and holm oak (*Quercus rotundifolia*) are protected species in Portugal, and any pruning or removal requires authorisation from the Institute for Nature Conservation and Forests (ICNF).

Q. What would happen if farmers were allowed to cut oak trees? Would the Montado continue existing?

A. Francisco and other members of the Tertúlia do Montado believe that the Montado would continue to exist even if farmers were allowed to cut oak trees. Cork production remains an important source of income, providing a strong incentive to maintain and manage oak stands.

However, current conservation regulations often restrict the removal of unhealthy or unproductive trees while offering little incentive for the establishment of new ones. As a result, farmers may be reluctant to plant young trees if this could increase tree density beyond recommended levels for rangelands. This situation can lead to ageing stands with limited regeneration, increasing the risk of disease outbreaks and tree mortality.

In addition, recent research has led some farmers to reconsider how oak trees are managed, with the aim of improving productivity and facilitating cork harvesting through more targeted management practices.

Francisco explained that, because his primary focus is meat production rather than cork production, he seeks to maintain a balance between tree cover and pasture availability. In his view, a functional Montado should contain approximately 20–35 oak trees per hectare, allowing sufficient space for extensive grazing. New trees are generally planted only to replace individuals lost during storms.

Lunch Visit: Gandum Village

During lunch at Hotel Gandum, participants had the opportunity to explore the agroforestry systems developed within Gandum Village. These systems combine syntropic agriculture with traditional farming practices to produce food sustainably while promoting biodiversity, soil regeneration and ecosystem resilience.

The visit provided an additional perspective on regenerative land management, highlighting how agroforestry systems can integrate food production with ecological restoration objectives.

1.2 Introduction to Tertúlia do Montado

The afternoon was dedicated to exchange and reflection among members of the Tertúlia do Montado, local stakeholders and partners from the TransforMed project.

Participants shared photographs, videos and presentations showcasing agroforestry systems from Portugal, Morocco, Tunisia and Turkey. Despite considerable diversity in environmental, social and political contexts, important commonalities emerged.

Across all countries, agroforestry systems combine forestry and livestock production while facing increasing pressures from climate change, water scarcity, land degradation and socio-economic transformation. However, differences in land tenure

systems, governance structures and resource availability strongly influence management approaches and opportunities for innovation.

Comparative Challenges Across Countries

The workshop identified several country-specific challenges:

Country	Main Challenges
Portugal	• Dependence on public support mechanisms • Difficulties in tree regeneration • Inappropriate livestock management practices • Regulatory constraints associated with cork oak protection
Morocco	• Institutional land tenure systems limiting agricultural use • Low trust between communities and government authorities • Overgrazing and soil degradation • Limited incentives for agroforestry • Recurrent droughts • Conflicts involving nomadic groups
Tunisia	• Climate change impacts, including erosion and soil degradation • Scarcity of natural resources • Weak coordination between land, water and forest authorities • Overgrazing • Small farm sizes • Institutional pressures on production systems
Turkey	• Absence of dedicated agroforestry policies • Restrictions on tree planting in grazing areas • Ageing farming population • Low adoption of innovation • Low rainfall and wind erosion • Agricultural intensification
Cross-cutting challenges (all countries)	• Limited trust between local communities and public institutions • Labour shortages linked to migration to urban areas • Increasing impacts of climate change

Transferable Practices and Innovations

Participants identified several concepts and practices with strong potential for transfer across Mediterranean agroforestry contexts:

- Strategic integration of livestock as agents of soil regeneration.
- Subdivision of grazing areas through paddocks and electric fencing.
- Regenerative grazing based on short-duration, high-intensity use.
- Precision management approaches to optimise productivity and profitability.
- Conservation agriculture techniques.
- Integration of multiple livestock species for complementary vegetation management.
- Water harvesting and storage infrastructure.
- Establishment of hedgerows to reduce wind erosion.
- Use of adapted forage species such as Sulla (*Sulla coronaria*).
- Integration of complementary tree species, including carob trees.
- Valorisation of traditional land-use planning systems.

The discussions emphasised that successful transfer of knowledge requires adaptation rather than replication. Practices must be adjusted to local ecological, social and economic conditions.

Emerging Topics for Future Research

Several additional themes emerged during the workshop discussions:

- Integrated fire risk management within agroforestry systems.
- Economic viability of increasing tree species diversity.
- Potential use of alternative livestock species, including camels, in increasingly arid environments.
- Labour shortages and skills gaps in rural areas.
- Administrative and regulatory barriers affecting management flexibility.
- Balancing conservation policies with productive land management.



Montado system at Herdade de São Luís farm, Alentejo region (photo: FiBL France)

2. Second day of the learning route, 5th of May 2026

2.1 Visit to Casa Mendes Gonçalves

The visit to Casa Mendes Gonçalves (CMG) generated significant interest among participants and sparked in-depth discussions on the practical implementation and future potential of syntropic agroforestry. As one of the major actors in the Portuguese food industry, CMG combines a strong regenerative vision with commercial agricultural production. Located in the Ribatejo region — one of Portugal's most fertile valleys, but also an area heavily shaped by intensive agriculture — the company uses more than 30 hectares of land as a living laboratory for regenerative agriculture and syntropic agroforestry.

The project is based on the understanding that trees are essential landscape elements for restoring water cycles, particularly in Mediterranean climates. Trees help create cooler microclimates that protect the soil from excessive heat, allowing water to infiltrate rather than evaporate. In this context, the project challenges the common assumption that more vegetation automatically requires more water. Instead, syntropic agroforestry follows the opposite logic: the greater the diversity and density of plants within the system, the lower the overall water demand can become.

The site integrates thousands of fruit and forest trees with the organic production of chili peppers and aromatic crops. Central to the project philosophy is the belief that “all simplification leads to crisis,” emphasizing biodiversity and ecological complexity as key elements of resilient agricultural systems.

The agroforestry system is managed by a team of 9 employees, and overseen by Felipe Pasini and Dayana Andrade, both specialists in syntropic agriculture with extensive experience in research, field implementation, and education. They work closely with Ernst Götsch, whose work has been fundamental in developing and disseminating syntropic agriculture internationally. Pasini and Andrade also contributed to documenting this approach through the short film *Life in Syntropy*.

The visit also provided practical insights into on-farm nutrient cycling and organic matter management. Participants were introduced to a composting system developed by HUMIVERSO, a machine costing approximately €12,000 and requiring around one hour of labour per week to operate. The system processes organic residues collected from restaurants together with chipped woody biomass, producing high-quality compost through a controlled decomposition process.

For many participants, this visit offered a rare opportunity to observe productive syntropic systems in practice. While some project partners were already familiar with the theoretical principles of syntropic agriculture, only a few had previously visited functioning commercial-scale plots. The visit therefore helped bridge the gap between theory and implementation and generated many practical questions and reflections among participants.

Q: Do syntropic systems have more problems with fungal diseases due to the higher moisture content?

A: The hosts explained that this can become an issue if the system is not managed correctly, which is why pruning is considered a fundamental technique within syntropic agroforestry. Pruning improves airflow and stimulates the overall vitality of the system, both of which help reduce the risk of fungal diseases. Beyond maintenance, pruning is also understood as a way to keep the system in an energized and productive state.

Q: What is the scalability potential of syntropic agroforestry systems?

A: CMG emphasized that their ambition is for this approach not to remain an “alternative” model, but to become a widely adopted agricultural practice. Although technological limitations currently constrain large-scale implementation, the expectation is that these barriers will gradually be overcome. To this end, CMG is working to manage space between rows and is testing mechanisation and technological tools capable of streamlining operations across their systems, without compromising productivity.

It was also noted that syntropic systems can already be adapted to lower planting densities, meaning that even partial integration of trees within agricultural land would represent a significant improvement compared to monoculture systems.

Q: What is the difference between the Oasis system and the syntropic approach?

A: The response highlighted that there are strong similarities between the two approaches, particularly in the use of multiple planting strata. However, syntropic agroforestry places a stronger emphasis on ecological succession and on transforming landscapes through the “metabolism” of the system itself, especially when restoring degraded areas. Continuous pruning is also central to syntropic management, helping maintain what was described as a “young shade” — a system that remains in a constant state of regeneration, vitality, and ecological activity.

Nevertheless, parallels with traditional oasis systems are clear, documenting historical approaches to multistrata agriculture. During the visit, a quote from Pliny the Elder regarding oases and their stratified configuration was mentioned. This quote can be found in his monumental work *Natural History*.

Talking of the oasis of Tacape (today Gabès in Tunisia), he said: *"There, under a very tall palm tree grows an olive tree. And under the olive tree, a fig tree. And under the fig tree, a pomegranate tree. Under the latter, the vine. Under the vine, wheat is sown and then vegetables, all in the same year, all growing in the shade of one another."*

Main activity's learnings

Syntropic agroforestry systems rely on ecological succession as a central management principle. By facilitating natural successional processes through strategic planting and regular pruning, these systems can maintain productivity, improve soil fertility, and enhance overall ecosystem functioning while balancing shade, humidity, and nutrient cycling.

The visit demonstrated that diversity and complexity are not obstacles to productivity but rather key drivers of system resilience. Through the integration of multiple species and production layers, syntropic systems generate a wide range of products throughout the

year, creating diversified income streams while reducing dependency on single crops. However, this approach requires a high level of technical knowledge, continuous observation, and year-round management, highlighting the importance of farmer training and capacity building.

Participants identified agricultural policies and land-use classification frameworks as significant barriers to the wider adoption of syntropic agroforestry and other agroforestry systems (AFS). Existing regulations and support schemes are largely designed around simplified production models and often struggle to accommodate highly diversified systems that combine characteristics of agriculture, forestry, and ecosystem restoration. As a result, many agroforestry systems fall outside conventional policy categories, limiting access to appropriate support mechanisms.

The visit also highlighted the importance of effective knowledge exchange in accelerating agroecological transitions. Successful innovation requires both learning from existing experiences and openly sharing challenges, failures, and lessons learned. Casa Mendes Gonçalves demonstrated how education and capacity building can be integrated into agroforestry development through dedicated training programmes and public educational initiatives, helping to expand awareness of agroecology and inspire future generations of practitioners.



Syntropic plots at Casa Mendes Gonçalves, Ribatejo region (photo: FiBL France)

3. Third day of the learning route, 6th of May 2026

3.1 Theoretical Introduction: Results-Based Management (RBM) for Montado

The third day of the learning route focused on the concept of Results-Based Management (RBM) for the Montado system, developed by the MED institute within the University of Évora. The discussion explored how policy instruments can support more sustainable land management practices while recognizing the economic realities farmers face.

The RBM approach is grounded in the understanding that many farmers wish to preserve their landscapes and cultural heritage, yet are often pressured by current agricultural systems to intensify production in ways that can be environmentally harmful. Within this context, participants reflected on the role of research and policy in creating conditions that enable more regenerative and diversified forms of land management.

The origins of result-based payments were presented through the example of the Burren programme in Ireland, which inspired the development of similar policy instruments elsewhere in Europe. In the Montado context, RBM is currently being tested as a pilot environmental measure aimed at supporting agroforestry systems and rewarding positive environmental outcomes rather than prescribing fixed management practices. The initiative has generated strong interest both among farmers and within European policy circles.

Participants noted important differences in land tenure systems between Portugal and countries such as Morocco, Tunisia, and Türkiye, where there is generally less privately owned land. This raised discussions about how RBM approaches could be adapted to different governance and ownership contexts.

Grazing management emerged as another important topic. Farmers generally recognize the ecological need for periods of rest within grazing systems, but economic viability remains a primary concern. Participants were particularly interested in understanding how these approaches could function under drier climatic conditions similar to those in their own regions and expressed a desire to see more examples from comparable environments.

A recurring theme throughout the session was the importance of starting with a long-term vision for the landscape. Rather than imposing standardized practices, the RBM approach encourages land managers to define the desired future condition of the Montado and work toward achieving measurable environmental outcomes.

The discussion also highlighted a fundamental shift in the logic of agricultural subsidies under the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP). Instead of paying farmers for implementing specific practices, RBM seeks to reward the environmental results achieved. Farmers retain the freedom to choose how they manage their land, while payments are linked directly to the quality of ecological outcomes.

The indicators used within the system include soil quality, biodiversity, oak tree regeneration, and the presence of trees of different ages. Additional elements assessed include the conservation of singular landscape features such as rocky outcrops, shrubs, temporary and permanent ponds, and riparian galleries. The system therefore frames environmental outcomes as part of a business model: stronger ecological results lead to higher payments, while poorer outcomes reduce compensation.

Participants also reflected on the innovative collaboration between researchers and policymakers behind the initiative. It was emphasized that RBM should not be understood merely as a research project, but rather as a practical policy instrument designed for implementation. One of the strengths repeatedly highlighted was the use of visual indicators, which make the evaluation process more democratic, accessible, and non-exclusive. These indicators are based on methods already used by experts in the field but are simplified in ways that allow broader participation and understanding among farmers and land managers.

Find the presentation "Agri-environmental Assessment of the Montado Using Visual Indicators" [here](#).

3.2 From Theory to Practice - Field Visit and Indicator Assessment

In the afternoon, participants moved from the theoretical framework of Results-Based Management (RBM) to hands-on field practice in the Montado, applying the visual indicators used within the RBM assessment methodology. The field session provided participants with a practical understanding of how ecological conditions in the Montado can be evaluated through accessible and observation-based indicators.

The indicators explored during the assessment covered several environmental dimensions. Soil conditions were assessed through plant indicator species such as *Rumex* and *Chamaemelum* spp., which can signal soil acidity. Erosion indicators, soil coverage, and signs of organic matter presence were also examined. Participants evaluated tree loss and tree regeneration density as indicators of ecosystem continuity and resilience. Biodiversity indicators focused on the balance between herbaceous species, including grasses, legumes, and other plant groups. The presence of thistles was discussed as a sign of excess nitrogen, while *Cistus* shrubs were identified as indicators of poor and degraded soils. Participants also learned to identify singular landscape elements and microhabitats, including both terrestrial and aquatic habitats that contribute to ecological diversity within the Montado.

The practical session generated important discussions around governance and implementation challenges. One topic raised was the issue of conflicts of interest in environmental assessments, which had reportedly created problems in the past. As a result, evaluations are currently conducted exclusively by the MED Institute of Évora to ensure greater neutrality and consistency in the assessment process.

A highlight of the afternoon was the unexpected participation of Mário de Carvalho, a well-known conservation specialist, who gave an informal talk on soil health and the Montado ecosystem. He explained the relationship between livestock nutrition and vegetation dynamics within grazing systems. Carvalho discussed how, during the winter, pastures are usually green and rich in protein, but often contain relatively low levels of fiber. As a result, livestock may browse shrubs to complement their diet with more fibrous material. In contrast, during the dry summer period, grasses become dry and fibrous but low in protein, leading cattle to search for vegetation that still contains higher protein levels. This natural variation in grazing behaviour can contribute to balancing vegetation dynamics and help manage shrub growth within the Montado ecosystem.

The discussion also emphasized the importance of mycorrhizae within healthy soils. Participants learned that when soils remain undisturbed, mycorrhizal networks are able to develop more effectively, helping transport phosphorus and other nutrients to plants and supporting overall ecosystem functioning.

Q: What about introducing goats to manage shrubs?

A: While goats could play a role in shrub management, the response highlighted that this approach is highly labour intensive. In a region already facing labour shortages, this creates important practical limitations for farmers.

Participants also discussed the European Union's target of reaching 25% organic agriculture. However, concerns were raised that current subsidy schemes and market conditions often fail to adequately compensate farmers for the additional challenges associated with organic production.

Subsidy systems more broadly were critically discussed. Participants noted that many existing subsidies primarily reward farmers for maintaining current practices rather than encouraging behavioural change or ecological transition. In this sense, the RBM approach was seen as innovative because it attempts to directly incentivize environmental outcomes rather than simply preserving the status quo.

Q: Cork oak trees are protected and often cannot be cut. What do you think about this regulation?

A: The response suggested that overly restrictive regulations may unintentionally discourage farmers from planting more cork oaks, since they fear losing management flexibility in the future. It was proposed that policies should instead allow tree removal when necessary, provided that farmers commit to replanting and caring for new trees over a long-term period, for example ten years.

Labor scarcity emerged repeatedly as a central challenge for the region. Participants heard examples of highly extensive systems were improved pasture quality significantly reduced labour requirements, with one example mentioning the management of 600 animals by a single employee.

Discussions also addressed tree mortality linked to climate change. Interestingly, participants learned that many trees are dying not only in drought-prone areas, but also in lower and more waterlogged zones. According to the explanation provided, this phenomenon may be linked to manganese toxicity, which weakens trees and makes them more susceptible to diseases and pests.

Overall, the session reinforced the perception among participants that many existing policy frameworks in Portugal remain counterproductive from an ecological perspective. At the same time, the RBM approach was presented as a promising attempt to align agricultural policy, environmental restoration, and farm management realities within the Montado landscape.



Applying observation-based indicators in the Montado (photo: FiBL France)

4. Fourth day of the learning route, 7th of May 2026

4.1 Mértola Future Lab

The visit to Mértola Future Lab began with an introduction to the museum space currently under development. One of the most striking features was a large reconstruction of the root system of a holm oak tree suspended from the ceiling, offering visitors a powerful visualization of the hidden ecological structures that sustain the Montado ecosystem. Participants learned that this indoor exhibition space is conceived only as the entrance to the museum, while the “real museum” exists outdoors, within the surrounding landscape itself.

The following presentation introduced the broader vision of the Mértola Future Lab, which focuses on “sowing regeneration” through initiatives that connect local community action with long-term regional approaches. The project responds to the growing ecological pressures affecting Mediterranean landscapes, particularly the loss of biodiversity linked to intensive agricultural practices. This is particularly relevant, as approximately 80% of land species are currently threatened by agriculture-driven landscape transformation.

Within this context, regeneration was presented not simply as a conservation strategy, but as an approach based on working together with natural processes rather than against them. The concept of regenerative practices was framed as “doing things as nature does,” emphasizing ecological cooperation, restoration, and long-term resilience.

The idea of “Future Labs” was also discussed as a methodology for anticipating future environmental and social challenges while creating spaces for experimentation, collaboration, and proactive landscape management. Through this approach, Mértola Future Lab seeks to connect ecological restoration with community engagement and regional development strategies for the future.



Reconstruction of a holm oak root system at Mértola Future Lab (photo: FiBL France)

4.2 Terra Sintrópica

The visit to Terra Sintrópica offered participants a living example of how regenerative agriculture can transform degraded semi-arid landscapes into productive and biodiverse systems. Located in the drylands of the Mértola region, an area highly vulnerable to desertification and climate change, the project operates within a landscape characterized by shallow “skeleton soils,” extreme summer temperatures, prolonged drought periods, and widespread land abandonment.

Despite these harsh conditions, Terra Sintrópica has succeeded in creating a remarkably lush and productive oasis through the implementation of syntropic agroforestry principles. Since 2018, great importance has been placed on soil health, leading to a shift in farming practices towards the syntropic agriculture approach. Several plots have been gradually cultivated using this method, resulting in clear improvements in soil quality and a significant increase in soil organic matter content.

The syntropic system currently produces approximately 100 boxes of fruits and vegetables per month. Participants found the visit especially interesting because the environmental conditions closely resembled those of their own territories.

The project forms part of a broader regenerative initiative known as CARES — the Center for Agroecology and Regeneration for the Semi-Arid — which combines applied research, food production, education, and community engagement. CARES seeks to explore how food can be produced while simultaneously restoring degraded semi-arid ecosystems through agroforestry and nature-inspired landscape design.

Participants observed how dense, multi-layered planting systems create microclimates that protect the soil, improve water retention, reduce erosion, and gradually rebuild soil fertility.

The broader philosophy of Terra Sintrópica was also discussed during the visit. Rather than presenting regeneration solely as an agricultural technique, the initiative frames it as a community-driven process of ecological and social renewal. The organization describes itself as a “living laboratory” for agroecological transition, connecting local knowledge, scientific research, and collective action to build resilience in semi-arid regions.



Syntropic plots at Terra Sintrópica, Mertola region (photo:FiBL France)

5. Fifth day of the learning route, 8th of May 2026

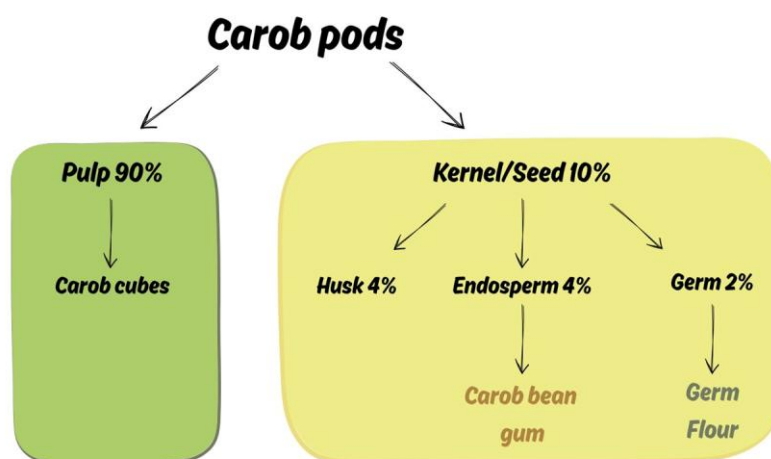
5.1 Visit to Carob processing facility Industrial Fareense

On the last day, the group visited the Carob processing facility of Industrial Fareense, LDA (IF), it is the only Portugal's historical manufacturer of carob bean gum.

IF was founded in 1944 in Faro, initially specialising in the production of animal feed and roasted carob flour. It currently specialises in the production of carob gum (E410) and carob germ flours. Food additive E410 is mainly used as a thickening agent in agroindustry. But it is also added in ice-cream preparations to help binding milk and water, avoid ice crystals and reduce melting speed.

To ensure access to raw materials, the company joined forces in the 1990s with Chorondo & Filhos. The group is responsible for processing 50% of Portugal's carob production, working exclusively with Portuguese raw materials.

Below a simple diagram of the carob processing facility and its products:



Industrial Fareense carob processing diagram

5.2 Visit to Carob nursery Alfaboia

In the afternoon, the learning route continued with a visit to the carob nursery Alfaboia, where participants were welcomed by Sr. José, a highly experienced carob producer and nursery specialist with more than 30 years of experience working with carob trees. The visit provided participants with valuable technical insights into carob propagation, varietal diversity, and the broader potential of carob cultivation in Mediterranean regions.

Over the course of his work, Sr. José has developed and selected 44 different carob varieties, each presenting significant variations in pulp and seed characteristics. His long-term dedication has been motivated by the ambition to improve local carob yields and strengthen the economic potential of this traditional Mediterranean species.

Participants engaged in an extensive discussion on the biology and management of carob trees. One question focused on climate resilience, particularly given the increasing frequency of both high and low temperature extremes in Mediterranean regions.

Q: How do carob trees deal with low temperatures?

A: Participants learned that most carob varieties can tolerate temperatures down to approximately -5°C, although tolerance levels may vary between varieties and according to local conditions.

Propagation methods generated considerable interest among participants, many of whom were interested in replicating carob systems in their own regions.

Q: Can carob trees be propagated by seed on farm?

A: Sr. José explained that propagation by seed does not produce genetically identical trees, meaning that the resulting plants will differ from the parent variety. For this reason, grafting is considered the only reliable method for maintaining specific varietal characteristics. He also noted that propagation through cuttings is generally unsuccessful with carob trees.

The discussion highlighted the remarkable genetic diversity of carob, with participants learning that there are believed to be around 1,000 carob varieties worldwide. Technical explanations were also provided regarding grafting techniques and nursery management practices. Participants learned that grafting is typically carried out on one-year-old rootstocks and that flowering can occur within only a few years after grafting. Sr. José further explained that suitable grafting material is generally collected between May and August.

Throughout the visit, participants were able to have numerous technical questions answered regarding varietal selection, grafting success, and adaptation to different climatic conditions.



Carob nursery Alfaboa, Algarve region (photo: FiBL France)

6. Evaluation of the learning route

Survey

At the end of the learning route, participants were invited to complete an evaluation survey to reflect on their experience and identify the main learnings they intended to take home. A total of 18 participants completed the survey and provided both quantitative ratings and qualitative reflections on their experience.

Overall, the Learning Route was received positively by participants. Seventeen of the eighteen respondents rated their overall experience as "very good", while one rated it as "good". In terms of expectations, ten participants reported that the route fully met their expectations, and eight indicated that it mostly met them.

The strongest recurring theme throughout the responses was the value of learning through exchange. Participants appreciated not only the technical content of the visits but also the opportunity to engage with colleagues from different countries and contexts.

When asked what they enjoyed most, participants frequently referred to:

- Diversity of people met and systems visited (5 mentions)
- Syntropic agroforestry (4 mentions)
- Exchange with colleagues (3 mentions)
- The Montado system (3 mentions)
- Discussions with farmers and practitioners (2 mentions)

One participant reflected:

"I particularly appreciated the exchange of experiences and knowledge shared by the different speakers throughout the visits, as well as their strong commitment and excellent command of the topics discussed."

Another highlighted the comparative learning dimension:

"I really appreciated learning about syntropic agriculture at two different scales, both sharing a similar approach but aiming to slightly different objectives, and thus having different challenges."

The broader atmosphere of the route was also noted:

"I really enjoyed seeing participants bringing their knowledge in connection with their context, which was one of the main objectives of the Learning Route."

While feedback was generally positive, participants also identified aspects that could be improved. The most commonly mentioned issue concerned the beginning of the Mértola visit, where participants joined an unplanned tour of buildings under renovation that are intended to become a museum. Eight respondents identified this as the least useful part of the route.

Other less positively rated aspects included:

- Long bus rides
- Group discussions that did not always facilitate equal participation
- Carob-related sessions perceived as less relevant to some contexts
- Feeling overwhelmed by the intensity of the programme

Evaluation of Individual Visits

Participants were asked to rank activities on a scale of 1 (most interesting or useful) to 5 (least interesting or useful). Across the programme, responses were strongly concentrated in the two highest categories (1 = most interesting/useful and 2 = very interesting/useful), suggesting that participants found value in a wide range of topics and approaches.

- **Herdade São Luís (Porcus Natura)**

This visit received very positive feedback. Fourteen of the seventeen respondents who rated the session considered it either highly interesting/useful (10 ratings of 1) or very interesting/useful (4 ratings of 2).

As one participant stated:

“It was a very enriching visit, especially for learning about grazing management across time and space, as well as the use of paddocks.”

Another observed:

“I found it interesting to put the focus on the grazing pressure as a key element for soil regeneration or conservation.”

Several participants noted that this visit provided an excellent introduction to the Montado system early in the programme.

- **Discussion with Tertúlias do Montado**

This session was also generally well received, with thirteen participants rating it either 1 or 2. Participants valued the opportunity to engage with practitioners, landowners and researchers working within the Montado system.

“A very enriching discussion, highlighted by Francisco’s experience sharing and his vision for grazing management and the conservation of this system.”

However, some participants felt the structure limited deeper exchanges:

“The proposed format was not so favorable to fruitful discussions in my opinion, a bit too short, we weren’t really able to use the questions asked as guidelines, and it lacked animation by someone really dedicated to it.”

Others suggested stronger facilitation, more time, and better introductions between participants and local stakeholders. As another participant mentioned:

“Excellent idea to have this workshop. However, it would have been good to collect what was shared by the groups. I think, we should've connected better with the Tertulianos before starting the discussion. With an ice-breaker for example !”

- **Casa Mendes Gonçalves**

This was among the highest-rated activities of the route. Sixteen of the seventeen respondents rated it either 1 (14 responses) or 2 (2 responses), indicating a very high level of appreciation.

Participants repeatedly highlighted the opportunity to observe mature syntropic agroforestry systems operating at scale and to engage with experienced practitioners.

Comments included:

“Amazing information and people.”

“For me it was a unique experience to see a grown syntropic system and perceive the discussions of the agronomists with the syntropic practitioners.”

“Awesome! Very enrichful to see a large scale syntropic system. Speakers were great!”

Many respondents appreciated the combination of practical observation and theoretical explanation.

One participant reflected:

“This experience is highly instructive regarding syntropic agroforestry, particularly through the different models and systems implemented, the selection of species, the succession of crop cycles, and intercropping practices.”

- **RBM field visit and indicator assessment**

This activity received consistently positive evaluations, with fourteen respondents rating it either 1 or 2. Participants appreciated learning about monitoring systems, indicators, and approaches for evaluating regenerative land management.

One respondent noted:

“It was a great chance to understand the model and how it can be implemented.”

Another emphasised its wider significance:

“This field experience on the co-construction process of indicators, monitoring and evaluation protocols, and payment instruments is highly insightful. It represents an innovative and relevant approach that deserves to be further developed and replicated on a larger scale.”

Several participants suggested that more discussion on adapting the approach to different national contexts would have strengthened the session further.

- **Mértola bio-region presentation**

Responses to this session were somewhat more mixed than for the field visits, although the majority of participants still rated it positively. Thirteen respondents selected either 1 or 2, while three selected 4. While many participants appreciated the territorial and community-based perspective, others felt it was less directly connected to agricultural practices.

Positive reflections included:

“Great to discover this way of thinking and community-based initiatives, it helps to get out of the feeling that nothing is possible.”

Participants valued seeing how municipalities, NGOs, researchers, and communities collaborate around food systems and regional development.

At the same time, some suggested a stronger focus on practical agricultural dimensions and greater relevance to other Mediterranean contexts.

- **Mértola nursery and agroforestry plot**

This activity received particularly strong feedback. Sixteen of the seventeen respondents rated it either 1 or 2. Participants from semi-arid contexts particularly highlighted its relevance due to the similarities in climate and environmental conditions.

One participant commented:

“Given the arid conditions that closely resemble the Tunisian context, I found that the presented agroforestry systems were the most relevant to our reality.”

Another observed:

“Fascinating to see how it is possible to regenerate a soil in such arid conditions.”

- **Carob processing facility**

The carob processing facility was also rated very positively. All sixteen respondents who evaluated the session rated it either 1 or 2. Participants valued learning about value chains, quality control, and processing techniques.

Comments included:

“Eye opening.”

“They are doing a great job and a lot of information should be communicated to future carob growers.”

Several participants highlighted the technical sophistication of the processing procedures and the potential relevance for developing carob sectors in their own countries.

- **Carob nursery and grafting demonstration**

This session received highly positive feedback, with twelve participants rating it either 1 or 2. Participants appreciated the practical focus and the opportunity to learn directly from practitioners.

As one respondent noted:

“Very interesting to see the work of a practitioner and be able to profit from his knowledge.”

Learning outcomes

Participants reported substantial learning across a range of topics.

The most frequently cited learning areas were:

- Syntropic agroforestry
- Agroforestry feasibility and implementation
- Results-Based Management (RBM)
- Sustainable food production techniques
- Understanding differences between European and TransforMed countries realities
- The Montado system

The practical value of the route is reflected in participants' assessment of the learning process itself. Fifteen respondents described the field visits and exchanges as "very useful" and three as "useful".

Confidence in applying the knowledge gained was also high:

- 4 participants felt very confident
- 13 felt confident
- 1 felt a little confident

Notably, no participant reported lacking confidence entirely.

Intended application of learning

Participants identified numerous practices and ideas they intend to apply or promote in their own work.

The most frequently mentioned was syntropic agroforestry (8 mentions), followed by:

- RBM approaches (3 mentions)
- Paddock rotation and grazing management (2 mentions)
- Carob grafting techniques (2 mentions)

Other intended applications included pruning techniques, fodder management, system intensification through agroforestry, carob processing knowledge, and the Tertúlias concept for peer exchange.

These responses suggest that participants viewed the route not simply as a learning experience but as a source of practical tools and approaches that could be adapted within their own contexts.

Relevance to local realities

When asked which sessions were most relevant to their work, participants most frequently cited:

- RBM (4 mentions)
- Syntropic agroforestry (3 mentions)
- Montado systems (2 mentions)
- Carob nursery (2 mentions)

Undiscovered topics

Although satisfaction was high, participants identified several areas they would like to explore further in future Learning Routes.

Suggestions included:

- More examples of silvo-arable agroforestry and intercropping systems (2 mentions)
- More examples of traditional agroforestry systems
- Native tree species
- Cultural landscape approaches
- Water management, access and distribution
- Greater focus on Portugal's arid systems

These suggestions point towards a desire for a deeper exploration of practical agroforestry adaptation strategies in Mediterranean and particularly semi-arid environments.

Organisational evaluation

Generally, the organization was rated positively, although some aspects have mixed responses and leave room for improvement, such as timing and scheduling, as well as food and catering.

Organizational aspect	Rating
Travel and Transport	• Very good: 8 • Good: 4
Accommodation	• Very good: 7 • Good: 4
Communication and Information	• Very good: 8 • Good: 4
Learning Materials and Resources Provided	• Very good: 6 • Good: 5 • Okay: 1
Timing and Scheduling	• Very good: 5 • Good: 4 • Okay: 1 • Needs improvement: 2
Food and Catering (quality, variety, and consideration of dietary needs)	• Very good: 3 • Good: 4 • Okay: 3 • Needs improvement: 2

Participants' suggestions for future improvement included:

- More free time to explore Portugal (3 mentions)
- Better facilitation and management of group discussions (2 mentions).
- Increase inclusivity by using small-group reflections, collaborative activities, and structured wrap-ups to capture a wider range of voices and document key learnings.
- Include more icebreakers, games, and team-building activities
- Shorter visits

- Better consideration of dietary requirements, including halal options
- Improved communication with drivers
- More attention to participant comfort, including seating during field visits and water availability
- Greater attention to rest and recovery time between activities
- Produce concrete output of the learning route (e.g., stakeholder document, take-home messages, or solutions from discussions).

Semi-structured interviews

To encourage reflection and peer-to-peer exchange during the learning route, participants were paired and invited to conduct short semi-structured interviews with one another during the drive to Lisbon, on the last day. Each participant had approximately five minutes of active listening time to answer two guiding questions related to the most valuable moments of the week and the learnings they intended to bring back to their own contexts:

1. **What were the most valuable visits or moments during the week? Why?**
2. **Which learnings are you bringing home, and which ones would you like to implement in your context or consider in your next project?**

Following the exchange, each pair produced a short three-minute audio recording summarizing the key reflections, insights, and implementation ideas that emerged from their conversation.

This format made it possible to establish a participatory and informal evaluation process, giving participants the opportunity to reflect on and discuss the learning route, whilst reflecting the diversity of experiences and career paths represented within the group.

The recordings were catalogued and analysed, enabling an assessment of what had been learnt from the visits and the information most relevant to the participants, as well as the potential for implementation in their home countries.

Analysis of learning frequencies and implementation-related quotes

1. **Syntropic Agriculture** - 13 mentions

Syntropic agriculture emerged as the most impactful and widely discussed learning from the learning route. For the vast majority of participants, this was their first encounter with the concept, and the opportunity to see multiple operational models, from small-scale soil regeneration projects to large-scale entrepreneurial ventures. Participants were particularly struck by the **rapid soil improvement achievable through mulching and intensive pruning**, challenging previous assumptions about the time required for soil regeneration. A recurring theme across all participants was the recognition that syntropic agriculture **requires contextualization** rather than direct replication. This understanding suggests participants grasped not just the technical practices but the underlying principles of succession, stratification, and functional diversity that can be applied flexibly across different Mediterranean conditions. The hope is that, following this visit, opportunities for **experimentation** will open up in other countries, enabling further

research into syntropic systems in arid environments. These pilot sites could thus be used **to assess water requirements** in both young and established systems – the greatest challenge facing Mediterranean agriculture.

"If we have a second project, we would like to apply it (syntropic agriculture) at our institution as a model, as a good system. We can show our Turkish farmers that the system is working very well"

"Even if access to water is essential and consumption is perhaps very important at the beginning we will try to think of models to carry out syntropic experiments in Tunisia, adapting to our context"

"If you want to implement this, at a local level we have to find, maybe redefine it in a more local context, with, local terms and local approaches"

2. Montado System / Regenerative Grazing - 11 mentions

Montado systems has been appreciated for its traditional landscape approach, but as well as for its potential, though sustainable grazing practices, for the valorisation of meat products while promoting ecosystem-services. The **rotational paddock system**, combining high stocking density with very short grazing duration, impressed participants as both practical and scalable, with clear benefits demonstrated in vegetation cover improvement, **soil health enhancement** through crust reduction, and increased biodiversity alongside improved animal production. Several participants noted the paradigm shift in understanding that **forests need active management including grazing**, and that quality grazing practices determine whether fertility is maintained or destroyed in the soil.

"What I would suggest is to apply this regenerative grazing and the rotational system with high stocking density and with a very short time"

"I'm thinking of applying it even for the farm, to make smaller paddocks"

"We can apply in the Mediterranean area (of Türkiye) is that there are many forests. The people can do it there."

3. Result-Based Model (RBM) - 9 mentions

The Result-Based Model generated substantial interest across all participating countries. The appeal lies in the **model's adaptability** rather than its rigidity. Participants consistently emphasized the need to co-design indicators with farmers based on specific production systems and local contexts. For Tunisian participants, the olive-cereal intercropping system emerged as a prime candidate for RBM application, while Moroccan participants saw **potential for national-level policy integration and farmer incentivization**. The model resonates because it shifts the paradigm from input-based subsidies to outcome-focused payments, encouraging farmers to focus on tangible results in soil health, biodiversity, and ecosystem services

"I would like to apply RBM, counting outputs and outcomes, as well as the final result to encourage farmers or inhabitants of a locality to better manage their project"

"it's a model that we can design, a specialized model dedicated to the Tunisian context, and choose a system that allows us to value ecosystem services in the fields of farmers"

"Why not apply this (RBM) in Tunisia for the cereal cultivation ecosystem between olive trees"

"Bringing farmers to have results on which they are rated, scored to be able to receive subsidies. It's interesting for the national level"

4. Carob (transformation/nursery) - 5 mentions

Carob emerged as a niche but strategically important topic among participants. The interest centered on three main technical areas: grafting techniques, varietal selection focusing on **high-yielding ecotypes**, and the **establishment of arboretums for conservation and propagation**. Participants were particularly impressed by the nursery visit, where they observed the productivity potential of selected varieties and the entrepreneurial approach of farmers working independently to improve local varieties.

"A farmer is doing [...] (is) trying to improve the local variety by himself. It's amazing. And how he also registered and worked with the ministry... That's really also encouraging. I mean, I wish our farmers can do similar things back home"

"I didn't fully realise that you can do such great things with just one plant"

5. Mertola (municipality/cooperation) - 4 mentions

The Mertola municipality experience left a great impression on those who engaged with its governance and organizational dimensions. The Mertola example demonstrated how **municipal leadership can catalyze innovation** without requiring massive external resources, instead leveraging local assets, building partnerships strategically, and creating an **enabling environment for experimentations** and groundbreaking innovations.

"I was impressed that they managed to put a research centre focussed on ecology and biodiversity in the middle of an area that is very isolated. They always talked about a project of everyone and not just a project of this idea, this entity, or this organisation"

"The main thing at the level of Mertola is this participatory question, that is, this question of working from bottom to top, with the participation of municipalities, NGOs and many other actors, through the population's awareness"

6. Learning process

Beyond the specific technical practices, several participants reflected on the learning process itself and the value of cross-cultural, interdisciplinary exchange in advancing agroecological knowledge. Not all the learnings referred to specific visits.

"Going to the field, looking at practical initiatives, real initiatives, really allows curiosity to grow and allows us to learn more."

Additionally, the learning route also revealed **common challenges across the Mediterranean** basin despite differences in national contexts and support systems. This recognition fostered solidarity and mutual learning, with participants realizing:

"There are challenges that are quite similar in the Mediterranean region and this also allows us to realize that there are plenty of things we can support each other on."

Conclusion

The May 2026 learning route through Portugal achieved its core objectives. Participants shared that this interdisciplinary exchange amplified curiosity, encouraged critical questioning, and fostered creative thinking necessary for contextual adaptation. The group recognized that "there are challenges that are quite similar in the Mediterranean region", enhancing solidarity while also revealing that solutions developed in one context, when thoughtfully adapted, can bring innovations elsewhere.

Holding the Learning Route in a country outside the project's study areas encouraged participants to welcome novelty and listen without the bias of local assumptions. Each person contributed with their own knowledge and stimulated collective curiosity and emulation. Post-visit interviews show a very strong willingness to adapt and apply observed practices: syntropic agriculture, regenerative grazing systems, and Results-Based Management emerged as the three most influential takeaways participants plan to transfer to their contexts. Beyond techniques, the learning route fostered a network of Mediterranean scientists and practitioners committed to agroecological transition and mutual support in overcoming implementation challenges.

A pronounced action orientation runs through the interviews "*we should not wait for everything to be perfect*": start now with available resources, test, learn from mistakes, and build momentum through visible results. Participants return home with concrete ideas and examples to establish demonstration sites, test species combinations, involve farmers in co-design, and build partnerships to scale successful innovations.

We warmly thank the University of Évora for organizing and facilitating the week with us (Dryland Agroforestry Center), and all project partners who contributed. We hope this learning route will help determine whether the potential observed in Portugal leads to wider landscape transformation across the Mediterranean.

Annex 1: List of participants and contacts

Country	Participants	Institution	Contact
	Amesmoud Gahmou	ANDZOA	gahmou@andzoa.ma
	Hicham Daoui	El Baraka	ss.elbaraka@gmail.com
	Aziz Elabidine	SOM	zi74us@gmail.com
	Khalil El Mejahed	UM6P	khalil.elmejahed@um6p.ma
Türkiye	Emre Ozdemir	BDIARI	emreozdemir@tarimorman.gov.tr
	Mehmet Ozbayrak		mehmet.ozbayrak@tarimorman.gov.tr
	Irfan Gultekin		irfangultekin@yahoo.com
	Ilker Topal		ilker.topal@tarimorman.gov.tr
	Melike Kus	DKM	melike.kus@dkm.org.tr
	Isil Celebi		isil.arslancelebi@dkm.org.tr
Tunisia	Wajdi Dhib	CAPTE	wajdi.capte@gmail.com
	Hazem Cherni		hazem.capte@gmail.com
	Edouard Jean		edouard.capte@gmail.com
	Mounir Louhaichi	ICARDA	M.Louhaichi@cgiar.org
	Sawsan Hassan		S.HASSAN@cgiar.org
	Azaiez Belgacem		A.Belgacem@cgiar.org
	Kalifa Jellali	DGF	jellalikalifa@gmail.com

Others	Fernando Sousa	DAC	fernando.sousa@drylandagroforestry.org
	Anne Bouwmeester		anne.bouwmeester@drylandagroforestry.org
	Luis Costa		luis.costa@drylandagroforestry.org
	Catarina Isidoro	MED	ana.isidoro@uevora.pt
	Helena Guimarães		mhguimaraes@uevora.pt
	Marco Trentin	FiBL Fr	marco.trentin@fibl.org
	Martin Trouillard		martin.trouillard@fibl.org
	Harun Cicek	FiBL Ger	harun.cicek@fibl.org
	Rosa Vilaplana	BETA	rosa.vilaplana@uvic.cat
	Diana Jimenez		diana.jimenez@uvic.cat
	Laura Vetter		laura.vetter@uvic.cat
	Giulia Costanzo	Uni Leon	gcost@unileon.es
	Claudia Heindorf	Uni Kassel	claudia.heindorf@uni-goettingen.de
	Laura Armengot	Uni Barcelona	larmengot@ub.edu

Annex 2: Detailed program of the learning route

Week plan	Time	Activity	Description
03.05	18:00	Departure from Lisbon airport to Évora Meeting point: https://maps.app.goo.gl/woMCpfrWGYgeb5M9 . (see description of day 1)	
<i>Night in Moov Hotel Évora</i>			
04.05	8:00 – 12:00	Silvo-Pastoral system in Montemor	Herdade São Luís (Porcus natura), with a focus on holistic grazing; <i>Montado</i> system in a traditional silvo-pastoral approach.
	12:20 – 13:30	Lunch at Hotel Gandum	An ecological hotel that has planted 50,000 trees within a productive agroforestry system, which supplies ingredients for its restaurant.
	13:30 – 16:00	Tertúlia do <i>Montado</i> – Hotel Gandum	Sharing experiences with the participants of Tertúlias do <i>Montado</i> - participatory platform for the sustainability of the <i>Montado</i> system.
<i>Night in Moov Hotel Évora</i>			
05.05	9:00 – 16:00	Visit to Casa Mendes Gonçalves	Agrifood business using successional agroforestry methods

Night in Moov Hotel Évora

06.05	9:00 – 14:00	Training on visual indicators by MED (3) Campus da Mitra	Theoretical Introduction to the Results-Based Model (RBM) for <i>Montado</i>
	14:30 – 16:30	Visit to <i>Montado</i> farm near Évora(4) Herdade Terra de Freiras	From Theory to Practice - Field Visit and Indicator Assessment of the RBM in a <i>Montado</i> farm

Night in Moov Hotel Évora

07.05	10:30 – 12:00	Visit to Mértola's Biological Station (5)	Presentation of Mértola's Biological Station and the Future Lab, a systemic approach on food production and distribution (bio-region)
	14:00 – 17:00	Visit to the regenerative center for the semi-arid (5)	Guided tour to the nursery and agroforestry plot
	18:00 – 20:00	Social dinner in the Algarve	

Night in [Hotel Made Inn Faro](#)

08.05	9:00 – 11:00	Visit to Carob processing facility in Faro (6)	Guided tour to the facility, explanation of the carob value chain and international market
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**14:00 –
16:30**

**Visit of Carob
nursery Alfaboia (7)**

**Presentation of newly
developed varieties and
their characteristics; short
training on grafting
techniques**

Night in [Moov Hotel Lisbon](#)

09.05

Departure from Lisbon airport
