



INTEGRATING COMMONLANDS AND LOCAL SHEEP AND GOAT BREEDS: KEY FACTS AND INSIGHTS



1. Bravia goats under extensive grazing in the Alvadia common land (Serra do Alvão), as part of a community-managed silvopastoral system 2. Sheep grazing under a compascuum system on fallow private plots within a traditional agricultural mosaic 3. Extensive grazing of Churra Galega Bragançana Preta sheep on Mediterranean shrublands in Montesinho Natural Park 4. Preta de Montesinho goats under extensive grazing on spontaneous shrublands in Montesinho Natural Park

THE WHAT AND WHY

Silvopastoral systems: traditional agroforestry solutions for today's challenges

Silvopastoral systems are key to the management of marginal and mountainous landscapes. In Portugal, mountain silvopastoral systems are rooted in baldios (common lands) that have been used collectively for generations. Common lands - consisting of woodland and scrub and herbaceous pastures- are essential for maintaining local sheep and goat breeds, adapted to the harsh physiographic and climate conditions. These breeds are the result of centuries of collective land use, shaped by shared knowledge and seasonal flock movements. This shepherding system often takes place through compascuum arrangements - informal access to small private plots such as orchards or fallow land. Although more difficult to manage, especially where land is fragmented, they still support grazing and landscape use. Recognising these systems is strategic. They provide practical models for using land that would otherwise be abandoned, while maintaining agrobiodiversity and cultural continuity in remote rural areas.

HOW THE CHALLENGE IS ADDRESSED

Community-based grazing: legal frameworks for local agroforestry practice

Before 1976, baldios were managed by the state, restricting the ability of local communities to autonomously govern and use these rangelands. The revision of the law marked a decisive change, returning ownership and management of common land to local communities. This gave new impetus to silvopastoral systems that reflected local needs and traditional practices. Alongside formal mechanisms, informal arrangements for customary grazing on private fallow land — known as compascuum — also continue to function, relying on trust and coordination between herders and landowners. In both cases, managing grazing pressure, rotation, and access is essential, especially in increasingly fragmented landscapes. The resilience of these systems depends on cooperation, shared responsibility, and deep-rooted local knowledge.

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Keywords: Commons; Rangelands; Land access; Customary use; Rural resilience



Funded by
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ADVANTAGES

Strategic benefits for land, people and livestock

Baldios and Compascuum-based silvopastoralism is a cost-effective and adaptable land management model for mountain and marginal areas. One of its main advantages is the ability to keep land use active without high levels of investment. Baldios allow communities to collectively manage large areas of land, enabling them to maintain grazing systems that reduce fire risk, control invasive vegetation and conserve soil and biodiversity. These areas are particularly valuable for maintaining native breeds such as goats and sheep, which are well adapted to steep, low-productivity land.

Through the traditional practice of compascuum, even small or fragmented plots can be integrated into productive use, supporting the sustainable exploitation of otherwise underutilized lands.

Another key benefit of these mountain silvopastoral systems on common lands and in areas managed under compascuum tradition is the increased access to land. These systems open up opportunities for young or landless farmers to start livestock production by using communal or fallow land through informal arrangements, bypassing the financial and legal barriers of land ownership. This helps to revitalise rural economies and counteract depopulation. Compascuum systems in particular allow the use of scattered small plots - often less than 0.2 hectares - that are otherwise difficult to farm. When integrated into seasonal grazing cycles, they extend pasture availability and improve herd mobility.

For landowners, maintaining seasonal use of the land maintains their link to the property, which is essential in areas where land registration is informal or incomplete. Continued use helps to protect ownership claims and preserve the social memory associated with land boundaries. Both systems rely on local cooperation and traditional knowledge, offering flexible solutions that are often overlooked by formal policies. Supporting them strengthens rural resilience, ensures cultural and ecological continuity, and makes public investment more efficient by targeting systems that are already working. As a final point, these common grazing systems represent an effective way to maintain agricultural activity in areas where intensive farming is neither viable nor desirable.

HIGHLIGHTS:

- Reinforces informal land rights through continued customary use
- Integrates small, scattered plots into functional grazing systems
- Maintains native breeds and prevents land abandonment in fragile areas



Sheep grazing under a compascuum system on traditional chestnut orchards

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Funded by
the European Union

This project has received funding from the European Union's Horizon Europe research and innovation programme under grant agreement No GA 101086563. Views and opinions expressed are however those of the author(s) only and do not necessarily reflect those of the European Union. Neither the European Union nor the granting authority can be held responsible for them.