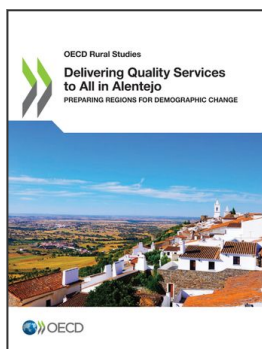


Foreword

Across and within OECD countries, significant gaps emerge in the access and quality of education and health services. Without action, shrinking and ageing populations in many rural communities are likely to experience rising unit costs due to population decline and increasing demand with higher shares of elderly, coupled with lower digital skill-levels and lower access to teachers and medical staff. These areas also suffer gaps in access to transport networks and digital connectivity, among many others. Hastened by the COVID-19 pandemic, there is now even greater urgency to embrace digital tools and adopt forward looking and effective policy levers to ensure the delivery of effective services to citizens living in rural communities.

This study focuses on education services in a multi-level governance context in the region of Alentejo (Portugal). It highlights the need for a better articulation and coordination among levels of government to improve the access and quality of education services. It also sheds light on the decisive role that geography plays and the importance of adopting a spatial lens to address the rising inequalities in access to education services in Portugal. The study provides guidance for Alentejo, represented by the Alentejo Regional Coordination and Development Commission CCDR-A (Comissão de Coordenação e Desenvolvimento Regional do Alentejo), and proposes sustainable and equitable long-term strategies for service delivery in the region. The national Cohesion and Development Agency (AD&C) also took part in and supported the elaboration of this study.

This study, which is part of the OECD workstream *Preparing Regions for Demographic Change*, was carried out as part of the OECD's Regional Development Policy Committee (RDPC) Programme of Work on OECD Rural Studies. The RDPC provides a unique forum for international exchange and debate on regional economies, policies and governance. It was discussed in the 26th meeting of the Working Party on Rural Policy and was approved by the RDPC [CFE/RDPC/RUR(2021)7] via written procedure on March 14, 2022.



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