

# Adapting governance for coastal change in Portugal

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## Abstract

In many countries, but particularly in Portugal, coastal conditions are already endangered by flooding and erosion, both likely to increase as a result of climate change. This daunting prospect raises critical questions of sustainability; social justice; genuine public participation and social learning; effective financing for long term social and economic benefit; connected polycentric governance; and the appropriate use of scientific knowledge bonded to public and political trust. While the development of most shorelines is nominally shaped by public administrative action, rapid coastal migration and excessive economic concentration have turned many threatened coastlines into a stage for settlement hazard and institutional chaos. In Portugal, despite clear evidence of increasing flooding and erosion, appropriate management responses are proving inadequate, both in the turbulent planning framework and in the scarce financial provision for future safeguard. The only plausible alternatives seem to lie in the processes of progressive adaptive governance, involving the trust and full participation of local communities; strongly supported scientific assessments of threat and safety; and fresh approaches to finding suitable funding sources. However, as evident from interviews with key actors in coastal planning in Portugal, the lack of policy clarity and political will, the weak science and poor coordination of stakeholders, combined with the particular regenerating coastal cultures of these communities, make any organised adaptive approaches highly problematic. This consequently places more emphasis on the rich cultural meanings of coastal occupation; of national identity in a time of economic crisis; of social justice in a period of reduced coastal maintenance funding; and of a more measured and sequential approach to an adaptive coastal governance.