



Local Government in Spain

Responses to Urban-Rural Challenges

edited by

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The H2020-MSCA-RISE-2018 project aims to provide solutions for local governments that address the fundamental challenges resulting from urbanisation. To address these complex issues, 18 partners from 17 countries and six continents share their expertise and knowledge in the realms of public law, political science, and public administration. LoGov identifies, evaluates, compares, and shares innovative practices that cope with the impact of changing urban-rural relations in major local government areas (WP 1-5).

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Local Responsibilities and Public Services



2.2. Digitalization of Rural Areas in Castilla y León

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Relevance of the Practice

Rural areas represent 85 per cent of the Spanish territory (6,678 municipalities), but only 20 per cent of the population live therein (7,686,815 inhabitants). These data reveal the cleavage that is increasingly opening up between urban local governments (ULGs) and rural local governments (RLGs). Territorial and social cohesion are threatened by rural depopulation and over-ageing population. Castilla y León, one of the largest regions in the European Union, located in the north of the country, is one of the autonomous regions that is most affected by these phenomena.



Figure 1: The Autonomous Community of Castilla y León in Northern Spain.¹

In 2017, the rural population accounted for 37 per cent of this region's total population (894,812 inhabitants), but this figure is rapidly decreasing. In the last 20 years the percentage of rural population fell by 14.3 per cent. Furthermore, the population of 65 and older reaches 23.3 per cent – almost five points above the national average (17.9 per cent). With the aim of reversing, or at least stopping, this trend, the Region of Castilla y León, along with its nine provinces, has launched the 'Smart Rural Territory' project. The main purpose of this project is

¹ Government Council of Castilla y León, 'Invertir en Castilla y León. Una apuesta segura' (*Junta de Castilla y León*, undated) <<https://invertirencastillayleon.com/>>.



to improve the delivery of public services in RLGs by using the smart technologies that are usually reserved to ULGs.

Description of the Practice

Since 2007, Castilla y León has been fostering the development of the Network of Digital Municipalities in its territory. All the provinces and the most important municipalities of the region joined the Network, that coordinated and assisted local governments by the implementation of ICT on public service delivery. In this context, the Government Council of Castilla y León approved the Research and Innovation Strategy for Smart Specialization (RIS3) of Castilla y León 2014-2020, in accordance with two key cohesion policy objectives of the European Union for the 2014-2020 period: Research and Development, on the one hand, and Information Society, on the other. Due to the Covid-19 pandemic the Strategy has been extended until the end of 2021.

Within the framework of this Strategy, Castilla y León has implemented the 'Smart Rural Territory' project for the digitalization of rural areas. The nine provinces and some municipalities of the region have entered into an agreement with the autonomous region to participate in this project. The service contract for developing the software system was awarded to Telefonica, after being chosen among 12 other bidders that participated in the tendering procedure. A significant share of the project funding comes from the European Regional Development Fund (ERDF) (EUR 1,115,500); the rest is contributed by the Autonomous Region of Castilla y León (EUR 750,000).

The project consists in developing a common software platform for the coordinated and intelligent provision of certain local public services, namely waste collection, water management and street lighting. Monitoring of service performance is done by installing intelligent and efficient sensors -so far, 42 sensors for waste collection, 11 for water supply and 9 for street lighting. In the future other services will be included in the project, such as bicycle rental service, environmental monitoring and intelligent parking, with the aim of creating new business opportunities for enterprises 4.0.

The main purpose of the project is to enhance effectiveness and transparency in public service management. The new technologies used in the project provide real time data collected by the provinces. This information can be very useful for assessing and improving service delivery in each municipality. An important outcome is the possible adaptation of the service performance to the actual needs of the population.

Besides this purpose, the project pursues other social and economic objectives. The most important are the following:

- improving the quality of life and well-being of the population in a sustainable manner;
- maintaining population in rural areas;



- creating new business opportunities in RLGs that could attract population to rural areas.

Assessment of the Practice

The ‘Smart Rural Territory’ project is the first regional initiative aimed at developing a smart rural platform for all the public authorities in the region: provinces, municipalities and the autonomous region itself. It has to be regarded as a significant attempt to promote innovation and better public service delivery at a local level. Additionally, it is a successful example of inter-territorial cooperation. From a technological standpoint, one of the project’s most important achievements has been the deployment of the Narrow Band IoT (NB-IoT), a wireless communication technology requiring a very low power consumption. Nevertheless, the project is still in progress. Therefore, it is difficult to thoroughly assess its outcomes from a social and economic perspective, such as cost savings or creation of new business opportunities.

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