



Local Government in Spain

Responses to Urban-Rural Challenges

edited by

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November 2021

The Country Report on Local Government in Spain is a product of the LoGov-project: “Local Government and the Changing Urban-Rural Interplay”.

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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This project has received funding from the European Union’s Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme under grant agreement No 823961.



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Intergovernmental Relations of Local Governments



5.3. Regional Plans to Prevent Depopulation of Rural Areas

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Relevance of the Practice

The Spanish population has increased by about 36 per cent since 1975, from 34.2 million to 46.9 million²⁰. However, this demographic trend is coupled with a process of imbalance in the distribution of the population with a concentration of residents in large cities and the depopulation of rural areas. These trends are at work both at national and regional levels. As for the former, the population of the capital City of Madrid has grown by 73 per cent in the referred period whereas 44 per cent of the municipalities in the Region of Madrid have less than 2,500 inhabitants. These demographic trends represent a challenge to all levels of government. Up to 63.1 per cent of municipalities and 13 provinces have lost inhabitants between 2000 and 2018.

In addition, the demographic trends also affect the balance between urban and rural local governments since the provision of public services is affected by both an excess and a lack of demand. One of the main drivers of depopulation in rural areas is internal migration. The internal migratory flows reinforce the imbalance in the distribution of population and therefore the attracting force of large urban centers along with shrinking rural areas. The imbalance also increases deficiencies in the provision of goods and services, especially those of a collective nature. Consequently, depopulation is not a problem solely addressed by rural local government but also for urban local governments that may be the destination of migratory flows.

Up to date not all the Spanish autonomous communities have developed specific plans to tackle depopulation. In 2001, the Autonomous Community of Aragon approved the Comprehensive Plan on Demographic and Population Policy. The Autonomous Community of Castilla y León, the most affected region by depopulation, agreed on a policy document Regional Strategy to Fight against Depopulation in 2005. Afterward, the policy document turned into the Agenda for the Population of Castilla y León 2010-2020²¹ with a further specification of objectives and measures to be implemented. The regional Government in the Community of Madrid has sponsored a Strategy to revitalize rural municipalities in the

²⁰ Data in this section is obtained from the Spanish Statistical Office.

²¹ Available at <<https://www.jcyl.es/web/es/agendapoblacion/agenda-para-poblacion/agenda-poblacion-2010-2020.html>>.



Community of Madrid since 2018.²² Recently, the Autonomous Community of La Rioja elaborated on a Regional strategy to face the demographic challenge and depopulation in February 2020.²³

Description of the Practice

The regional plans on depopulation contain a set of priority actions to reverse the depopulation process in rural areas. The regional plans largely coincide in identifying the following areas of policy action: (i) education and training, (ii) infrastructure, (iii) information and communication technologies in rural areas, (iv) public housing, (v) transport, (vi) gender equality, (vii) regional incentives for the development of economic activities and entrepreneurship, (viii) environmental protection and use of natural resources, (ix) policies for the elderly, (x) culture and tourism, (xi) social participation. In general terms, the regional plans and strategies are subject to be reviewed in order to expand both their territorial coverage and the measures to be implemented. Therefore, the regional plans present an evolving dynamic fueled by particular initiatives not necessarily related to all rural areas but focused on the specific context of certain municipalities.

The regional plans commonly point to reduce the migratory flows from the rural to the urban centers if not to revert the flows. However, there are differences in terms of the scope of the strategies. In some cases, the regional plans especially focus on rural areas whereas others explore a broader set of measures targeting the regional territory as a whole. As for the latter, the regional plan of La Rioja is mainly designed at the regional level. This circumstance implies that most of their content is not territorially delimited (e.g. training programs and professional activities - self-employment and solidarity-based economic activities such as the implementation of ethical banking and finance; theatre and journalism workshops, grants for immigrants, integration-). Yet, part of the activities in the regional program aimed at the development of projects that foster the relationship between urban local governments (URLs) and rural local governments (RLGs) (e.g. the project 'Semillalab' consists of a ICT environment to connect people, institutions and undertakings). Regarding RLG centered programs, the Strategy to revitalize rural municipalities in the Community of Madrid targets the 78 RLGs with less than 2,500 inhabitants. In this context, the measures adopted address specific problems of RLGs such as the low participation of women in the economic or the limited access to ICT.

From an institutional perspective, the design of these regional plans follows a top-down approach with limited involvement of local governments in the initial stages. To a large extent, this top-down approach is influenced by the need to endorse regional development plans that are eligible for support from the European Commission's European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development. This scenario creates an incentive for centralizing the decision-making process

²² Available at <<https://www.comunidad.madrid/etiquetas/estrategia-revitalizacion-municipios-rurales>>.

²³ Available at <<https://www.larioja.org/agenda-poblacion/es>>.



at the regional level. Nevertheless, the participation of local governments normally occurs at a later stage in the implementation of the plans. In this regard, regional plans usually foresee the establishment of working groups that are set to follow up on the plans' actions. In some cases, the working groups are configured as a consultative body with rules of internal governance. The regulations of these working groups require a composition with a certain percentage of members representing local governments of rural areas.

In addition, the regional plans promote signing cooperation agreements between the municipalities targeted by the plans and the regional government in order to adapt the plans' objectives to municipalities' needs and preferences.

Assessment of the Practice

Depopulation is a widespread trend, but its causes and consequences may be determined by the most immediate context of the municipality. These circumstances make it difficult to adopt a general plan to tackle depopulation uniformly. On the other hand, depopulation produces effects not only on rural areas but also on urban municipalities as a consequence of migratory flows. Therefore, the regional plans face a complex scenario where a general approach towards depopulation in terms of the public policies and the territory covered has to be combined with tailor-made measures for certain rural areas.

This combination of flexible general goals and in-depth understanding of the specific characteristics of each rural area requires to anticipate the incorporation of the different types of local governments (urban and rural) to early stages in the elaboration of the regional plans on depopulation.

One of the problems presented by the late incorporation of the municipalities through monitoring groups or collaboration agreements with the regional administration is the overlapping of initiatives to face the same problems from different levels of government not necessarily coordinated, and with the participation of different stakeholders. Thus, the development of regional plans incorporates, for example, universities and associations of municipalities, and the initiatives to tackle depopulation at a local level integrate active members of the community and businesses. The assessment of regional plans will, therefore, depend on their capacity to integrate and coordinate stakeholders and initiatives that follow one another simultaneously.

In addition, the plans still have a limited scope in terms of promoting the leadership of local governments themselves and the coordination with other stakeholders in order to boost the economic and social development of the most depopulated areas. Local governments are mainly dependent on regional, state, and European initiatives in this regard. This is the case of the promotion of female employment in agriculture in RLGs. Despite of the nation-wide legal framework for promoting female management of farms (Law no 35/2011 on Shared Ownership of Farms) the results in terms of initiatives are quite diverse, ranging from 0 initiatives



(provinces of Madrid, Barcelona, among others) up to almost 300 in the Autonomous Community of Castilla y León (298 as for October 2020). This lack of convergence points to other factors at play such as the economic resources and grants placed by the regional governments to implement the legal framework.

Finally, regional plans to prevent depopulation of rural areas present a limited effort in the inclusion of assessment and monitoring tools or concerning the exchange of practices between regions. Ultimately, the comparison between the different initiatives would allow for identifying best practices.

The workshops and interviews conducted allow us to identify two dimensions in the development of regional plans to address depopulation that affect the local level of government. First, one dimension concerns whether the initiative is led by regional governments or sponsored by local entities. A second dimension of variability is whether the measures are contained in multi-year policy plans or are translated into regulatory provisions.

With respect to the first of the above dimensions, the interviews conducted point to a greater frequency of regional initiative in the development of these plans. This predominance is due to several factors, including the greater capacity of regional governments to attract public funds linked to depopulation plans.

The interviews also show that the phenomenon of depopulation is not necessarily linked to rurality. In this sense, some income guarantee programs, or aspects such as the proximity of rural entities to urban areas, have served to settle the population and avoid depopulation processes. In other cases, depopulation phenomena are localized in certain areas characterized by a productive system dependent on the primary sector or are not perceived as a generalizable phenomenon in the region's municipalities. In this sense, the main need to identify and locate where the depopulation phenomena occur in a concrete manner is observed in the plans. These circumstances make it difficult to draw up general plans on depopulation, consolidate the formation of specific local interests, question the generality of the relationship between rurality and depopulation and force the search for ad hoc solutions.

Regarding the second dimension that characterizes regional plans on depopulation, there are examples of autonomous communities, such as Castilla la Mancha, have passed legislative measures on depopulation instead of programmatic plans without binding force (i.e. Law no 2/2021, of May 7, on Economic, Social and Fiscal Measures against Depopulation and for the Development of the Rural Environment in Castilla-La Mancha). In this case, the municipalities are classified into different zones according to demographic, economic activity, land use and accessibility criteria in relation to the rural environment. The application of planning and programming measures for the territorial development of the rural environment is based on the characteristics of each of the zones thus defined. This model of depopulation plan with a legislative basis is presented as necessary in order to remove from the political debate the development of a policy that requires a sustained action in the medium or long term.



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This project has received funding from
the European Union's Horizon 2020 re-
search and innovation programme under
grant agreement No 823961.

