

# POPULATION AND RURAL TOURISM IN LOW DEMOGRAPHIC DENSITY TERRITORIES IN SPAIN

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## ABSTRACT

In this contribution those rural areas that are under a population regression are examined and also the potential economic activities, linked to rural tourism, that can offer possibilities to truncate or minimize this demographic crisis. Its recent population evolution, and the causes and evolution of rural tourism are preferably analysed. Transversely, some reflections on public policies for local development and the problems of territorial organization of local areas are made.

The field of study is all municipalities in Spain. Using a database of municipal level allows us a good snapshot of current status of the population and settlement for both rural and urban municipalities. To this end, we have taken data from the Instituto Nacional de Estadística (National Statistics Institute of Spain) and subsequently they have been georeferenced with the support of GIS, resulting in an illustrative mapping that allows us to draw interesting conclusions.

## I. INTRODUCTION AND STATEMENT OF THE ISSUE

The depopulation, aging and demographic decline of the Spanish rural areas, at different scales, have been addressed by many different researchers.

Thus, this contribution is not unlike other. It starts from the assumption that the significant population increase experienced by Spain in the last two decades has not benefited equally to their territories, being barely noticeable in the rural areas. In turn, the recent decline of foreign immigration and birth and, consequently, the increase of aging and mortality in the last three or four years, are causing a rapid and drastic new inflection which also discourages even more those rural areas, already burdened by aging caused by the emigration during the 60's and 70's. Therefore, we can talk without pretence of a severe demographic crisis whose

effects have been felt for years. In turn, we believe that the consequences of it would have been much more severe in certain rural areas in the absence of rural development policies and an extensive and varied set of particularly interesting economic initiatives around rural tourism, intense in some regions, and generally associated with natural areas and a rich cultural heritage.

Therefore, we reflect on this contribution of those rural areas in demographic decline and the potential of economic activities linked to rural tourism to truncate or minimize the demographic crisis that are suffering. Throughout this contribution the population evolution in recent years, the causes and development of rural tourism are analysed. At the same time, we have also treated transversely the public local development policies and problems of territorial organization, management and governance of municipalities in these economically and demographically depressed areas.

Using municipality-level data base allows a good analysis of the status of the population and settlement for both rural and urban municipalities.

We preferred to take the data directly from the Instituto Nacional de Estadística (INE) and then georeference them supported by a GIS (ArcGis 10). Our interest is specifically limited to certain variables (density, growth, presence of foreign population aging and indexes) for the last period of almost 15 years.

The analysis of rural tourism is the second focus of this contribution. One sector that we believe in our hypothesis that, at least, contributed to diminish the population loss. For this case, the scale to address the tourist information of all Spain had to be at the provincial level, also from the INE.

Serve this set of maps (10 in total), in addition to the text, to show a quick in-depth analysis of the demographics and rural tourism for the whole Kingdom of Spain.

## **II. DEMOGRAPHIC WEAKNESS OF SPANISH RURAL AREAS**

The latest census of 46.507.760 inhabitants in January 1<sup>st</sup>, 2014 shows a reduction of natural growth, scarcely significant, as result of the declining birth rates and an increased mortality, according to an elevated aging despite the growing lifespan, already elevated in Spain. Regionally almost all Autonomous Regions have lost population over the previous year and four of them -Aragón, Castilla-León, Castilla-La Mancha and Extremadura- have even reached densities close to the 20 inhabit./km<sup>2</sup>.

The aforementioned demographic involution is not new to the last year but is already dramatic since years ago, decades in some provinces, especially those with a predominantly rural population. Thus, most of the Spanish provinces, mostly situated in the inland and national border areas continue to lose population, and some of them have less population in relative and absolute terms than a century ago, and even a century and a half.

All these and a few more have been affected by historical emigration processes, especially intense in the 60s and 70s, who emptied their rural areas and medium cities. These past emigration processes wounded mortally these territories, which currently still manifest their demographic consequences. With the current crisis and the new stage of demographic regression, very evident since 2010, it becomes clear a new demographic drain in those provinces.

This analysis is even more revealing if we take a look to a municipal level, which shows a more complete and accurate demographic in-depth analysis of the different territories of Spain. In this regard, just watching to any map with population density shown at a municipal level we can check the very low densities of some areas that correspond with the same provinces and regions “of always”. Similarly, in a strong correlation with the low density we can notice the high aging and negative Population Growth Rate (and even considering also migration rate). Six maps are accompanying our demographic analysis at this municipal level.

### **III. LOCAL ADMINISTRATION AND RURALITY, AN ARDUOUS DEBATE**

With this demographic situation in rural areas, a political and technical debate started, not yet closed, on the future and better organization of local government and administration in Spain. In this section we have made some reflections about these items.

### **IV. THE BIRTH OF PUBLIC POLICIES FOR RURAL DEVELOPMENT**

Despite the population decline and growing aging of rural areas, previously investment has never been so high, and rural areas have never been so supported as in the current period that was opened with the return to democracy. In this sense, the institutional context of new public policies for local development is analysed. This has led to a substantial improvement in general welfare in Spanish rural areas.

The current demographic situation in these territories certainly could have been worse without the huge investment of effort, resources and policies of various kinds and territorial origin among which are those concerning tourism.

### **V. TOURISM IN NATURAL AND RURAL AREAS. CAUSES OF ITS DEVELOPMENT AND EXPERIENCES**

Compared with the traditional model of sun-and-beach appears with strength, just about three decades ago, the so-called rural and inland tourism. This way, it is well developed in the heat of a new demand, with different products (rural, agrotourism, ecotourism, bird watching, etc.) that are mainly supported by the attractiveness of natural and cultural resources.

In this chapter the new institutional, social and technological context of rural tourism is reviewed, as well as the main results of the sector in Spain. This items are also supported by several maps and statistics at a provincial level.

We can see that territorially the importance of rural tourism is very uneven. It is precisely in the inland areas that have protected natural spaces and around them where a higher concentration of touristic offer can be observed, coinciding with mountain ranges and areas of special landscape value, and benefiting especially those closer to the major cities and most populated areas.

With this framework of new demands and financial incentives, all rural areas of Spain, mostly sparsely populated, are scrambling to sign up for the promotion of rural tourism. Everyone wants to assert their cultural and natural resources to attract the traveller and the tourist. But in this race not all rural areas alike have achieved their purposes.

## **VI. CONCLUSIONS AND FINAL CONSIDERATIONS**

We have found a Spanish rural territory with very different situations concerning their level of consolidation of tourism, with spaces of remarkable concentration of tourist activity, bordering in some cases on congestion for their socio-economic and environmental impacts, and with many others that could just scarcely be classified as emerging destinations.

In order to improve rural tourism where possible within a framework of sustainability and knowing that is not easy to generalize, as diagnoses and proposals vary depending on which territory we are looking at, we want to highlight some challenges in this contribution.

The development of rural tourism has been the main driving force for the preservation, restoration and enhancement of natural and cultural heritage. In turn, it has allowed an income and direct and indirect employment. But, being an important activity, combined with the policies of rural development and territorial cohesion, it has not prevented the loss of population of Spanish rural areas, the causes are due to other different factors, although it that has served to cushion the demographic crisis of many municipalities and counties. Therefore, one might also ask what demographic and economic landscape would we have found today if the thousands of initiatives from lodging companies, catering and entertainment assets have not took place, as well as how have contributed many other public actions that have multiplied everywhere by the warmth of tourism in natural and historic-cultural heritage areas. Private and public initiatives that involve the settlement of families and people in rural areas.

However, aging, population loss and a decreasing economic activity, especially visible in the areas of “deep rurality”, limit or reduce the economic opportunities. In addition, this also influences their social and demographic context. Therefore, these spaces, preferably borderlands and inland, cry out a distress call that the Spanish and European public administrations, as well as private agents have to deal with strategies and actions. These may be general for the country or region or may be more unique and specific to the enormous diversity of counties and municipalities, since there are no magic solutions or recipes.

The historical development of the last century condemns and worsens the demographic situation of settlements and municipalities, especially those with elder populations (problems of generational replacement). The situation is already alarming and a threat. Therefore, in the coming years we will witness the disappearance of municipalities or the arrival of new forms of administrative organization that will, somehow, configure viable rural areas with low population density and subdued to high aging processes.