

Towards rural proofing (in Spain): (un)founded expectations?

Hacia el mecanismo rural de garantía (en España):
¿expectativas (in)fundadas?

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Abstract

This paper takes as its starting point the high expectations that rural proofing has been arousing in recent years in the European Union. Therefore, the main objective is twofold. Firstly, to carry out an analysis of the state of the art and situation of the RP in general, and in Spain in particular; secondly, to examine the situation and perspectives that this mechanism may have in Spain, considering the institutional environment, the organisational culture, the division of competencies, the (not excessively high) tradition of intersectoral cooperation at the different levels of government, etc. Through various specific objectives, a decalogue of the key aspects of rural proofing is drawn up, as a mirror against which to contrast the processes of practical implementation, and various aspects of the Spanish case are analysed. The conclusions point to the fact that, from our point of view, the rural proofing is the confirmation of the failure of a central aspect of the traditional place-based approach, the integrated approach. On the other hand, we examine the different limitations of the implementation of rural proofing in Spain. These suggest that we should be cautious with the probably excessive, and perhaps unfounded, expectations that have been generated in Spanish rural areas about the real possibilities of rural proofing.

Key words: place-based approach; European Union; demographic perspective; rural development; public policies.

Resumen

El punto de partida son las grandes expectativas que el Mecanismo Rural de Garantía ha despertado en los últimos años en la Unión Europea. Por ello, el objetivo principal es doble. En primer lugar, realizar un análisis del estado de la cuestión y de la situación del Mecanismo Rural de Garantía (*rural proofing*) en general, y en España en particular; en segundo lugar, examinar la situación y perspectivas que este instrumento puede tener en España, considerando el entorno institucional, la cultura organizativa, la división de competencias, la tradición (no excesivamente alta) de cooperación intersectorial en los distintos niveles de gobierno, etc. A través de varios objetivos específicos, se elabora un decálogo de los aspectos clave del Mecanismo Rural de Garantía, a modo de espejo con el que contrastar los procesos de implementación práctica, y se analizan diversos aspectos del caso español. Las conclusiones apuntan a que, desde nuestro punto de vista, este mecanismo es la constatación del fracaso, al menos parcial, de un aspecto central del tradicional enfoque territorial del desarrollo rural, el enfoque integrado. Por otro lado, se reflexiona sobre diferentes limitaciones que en nuestro país tiene la implementación de este instrumento. Estas nos aconsejan ser cautelosos con las probablemente excesivas expectativas, tal vez infundadas, que se han generado en el ruralismo español sobre las posibilidades reales del Mecanismo Rural de Garantía.

Palabras clave: enfoque integrado; Unión Europea; perspectiva demográfica; desarrollo rural; políticas públicas.

1 Introduction, objectives and methodology

"Rural proofing is an attempt to ensure that all policy areas take rural issues into consideration". This is the definition of rural proofing (RP) by the European Network for Rural Development (ENRD) (ENRD, 2017, p. 26). The reference is straightforward enough to make explicit where the European institutions wanted to go in relation to rural proofing. The Commissioner for Agriculture and Rural Development at the time, P. Hogan, also expressed his firm support for making decisive progress in the development and consolidation of RP at EU level (ENRD, 2017).

Its relevance had been highlighted a year earlier at the Second Rural Development Conference (Cork Declaration 2.0) in a succinct yet conclusive way (European Commission, 2016). In its first point on public policy guidelines, it was stated that "A rural proofing mechanism should ensure

this [rural potential] is reflected in Union policies and strategies” (European Commission, Cork 2.0 Declaration 2016, p. 4). It urged decision-makers to

systematically review other macro and sectoral policies through a rural lens, considering potential and actual impacts and implications on rural jobs and growth and development prospects, social well-being, and the environmental quality of rural areas and communities” (p. 8).

Subsequently, the European Commission, within the framework of the long-term vision for the EU’s rural areas (European Commission, 2021), clearly states that

Rural proofing means reviewing policies through a rural lens, to make these policies fit for purpose for those who live and work in rural areas. In practice, it considers, for policies in the making, the actual and potential, positive or negative, direct and indirect impacts and implications on rural jobs, development prospects, social well-being, equal opportunities for all and the environmental quality of rural areas and communities.

In the same context, the ENRD promoted several seminars aimed at sharing experiences and advancing a common perspective to promote RP at European level (ENRD, 2022).

A question that arises is why it is now that this important mobilisation around RP has taken place, especially from European ruralism. To understand this better, it is necessary to look back somewhat. Indeed, since the early 1990s, the local approach to development in rural areas (also known as rural place-based approach) has been implemented. Since then, this approach, in general, and the programme in which it is most widely used (LEADER), in particular, has been extensively and thoroughly analysed in various aspects and applications across many countries and rural areas. After more than three decades, in the context of the European Union, the place-based approach to rural development (LEADER) is fully established and widely regarded as successful.

However, if what we can call the ‘rural ecosystem’ (mainly everything related to the territorial approach to rural development) is perfectly aligned with the approach, it is clear that there are at least two reasons for dissatisfaction. Firstly, despite the achievements, there are many aspects in which rural areas have not improved sufficiently, sometimes falling far short of their potential. Secondly, and surely partly responsible for this, the public policies that constitute the external environment of the ‘rural ecosystem’ have lacked the necessary sensitivity and awareness and, consequently, have not implemented adequate measures to respond to rural peculiarities and needs. In other words, the ‘integrated’ approach, on which so much emphasis has been placed when talking about LEADER, has been almost absent. Additionally, there has been no real territorial

approach to the development of rural territories. This failure does not diminish the important achievements and is not mainly the responsibility of the 'rural ecosystem.' Instead, it lies with the external environment and other public policies, which have failed to act jointly or in a coordinated way to develop even a minimally integrated territorial approach.

RP within the EU has not emerged autonomously. It is based on international experiences since the late 1990s, and many seminars and documents produced by European institutions draw on these references. These references include pioneering efforts in Canada (Hall & Gibson, 2016), more continuous and consolidated approaches in England (Atterton, 2019), and innovations in participatory practices in Scotland. They are also more fully implemented by regional authorities, such as in Finland (ENRD, 2022; Sanz et al., 2023). Additionally, some studies provide a more methodological perspective, associating RP with Territorial Impact Assessment (TIA) (Gaugitsch et al., 2022). Experiences in Mediterranean countries are practically non-existent. In Spain, for example, progress on RP is a very recent process driven by European institutions in recent years.

Therefore, the primary reason RP is necessary is its potential to support a place-based policy approach (Bryce, 2024). In a broader context, adequate RP could help reduce inconsistencies or misalignments in public policies implemented in rural areas while also enhancing synergies between them. This could also help government departments design more coherent policies focused on the well-being and quality of life of rural inhabitants. It could address the frequent urban bias of many sectoral policies and avoid unintended consequences arising from certain measures. Ultimately, it would help identify and better leverage the potential of rural areas to meet the broader economic, social, and environmental objectives of public policies.

The theoretical conception of the RP approach is undeniably attractive and promising. It operates in two key directions: ensuring coherence among public policies and their alignment with the needs of rural areas, and advancing the territorialisation of public policies—an essential element for achieving such coherence. Disciplines such as Geography and Regional Economics, among others, have been advocating for this approach for decades. However, while the RP approach is both appealing and innovative, it is also complex, standing in stark contrast to the relative simplicity of sectoral approaches that are frequently implemented with little to no territorial sensitivity.

Within this framework, the paper begins by addressing the high expectations that RP has generated in recent years. Its primary objective is twofold. First, it seeks to analyse the state of the art and current status of RP, both generally and with a specific focus on Spain. Second, it examines the practical feasibility of implementing this mechanism in Spain, considering factors such as the

institutional environment, organizational culture, division of competencies, and the country's relatively limited tradition of intersectoral cooperation across different levels of government.

To achieve these objectives, the paper is structured into six sections, each addressing a specific goal. The first objective is to provide a concise overview of how RP is conceptualized within the EU and to contextualize the recent steps taken in Spain (section 2). The second objective involves introducing key reflections and lessons derived from international experiences about the essential components of an effective rural proofing mechanism. These insights will help evaluate and refine potential approaches to RP and, where applicable, measure progress in its implementation (section 3).

The following three objectives focus on the Spanish case (section 4). Therefore, the third objective is to analyse the emergence of RP in Spain, which has primarily been approached from a demographic perspective and policies against depopulation. These aspects have been at the centre of public policy attention in recent years and affect a large part of Spain's inland rural areas (section 4.1). While there are still few cases of clear and complete adoption of RP in legislation, this objective focuses on analysing two cases in greater detail: the regions of Castilla-La Mancha and Valencia. Despite a common orientation at the outset, a significant divergence is evident between them as a result of political change in the latter region (section 4.2).

If several regions have been taking steps towards the introduction of RP in their legislation, it is also true that until recently, there were no references available at the national level. The main reference now comes from the Law on the Institutionalisation of Public Policy Evaluation (Law 27/2022), which, almost at the last minute, managed to explicitly include RP. The presentation and analysis of its implications, at least from a theoretical perspective, constitute the fourth objective (section 4.3).

Finally, the fifth specific objective (section 5) aims to answer a key question, which is present and implicit throughout the paper: are we, at least in Spain, idealising the real possibilities of RP and, therefore, are we facing truly well-founded or unfounded expectations?

Given the nature of the paper, the methodology is based mainly on the consultation and analysis of grey literature, evaluative publications on public policies and some specific regulations. These will be introduced throughout the text and, in any case, a list of the main documents used is given in the references. These are completed with a reflexive dimension, aiming to assess the real potential of RP in the Spanish context.

2 Driving the adoption of the rural proofing narrative in EU institutions

The trigger element of RP in the field of ruralism at the European level was the *II European Conference on Rural Development* and the *Cork 2.0 Declaration* (European Commission, 2016). Its first point on public policy guidelines states: "A rural proofing mechanism should ensure this [rural potential] is reflected in Union policies and strategies" (p. 4). The reference, though simple, explicitly highlights the need for such a mechanism in relation to EU policies. On one hand, the document took into account the experience of various countries, especially within the Anglo-Saxon sphere of influence, but also (at least implicitly) recognised the insufficiencies and the need for a step forward to enhance and make the place-based approach —already in place for nearly 25 years— significantly more effective. The Commissioner for Agriculture and Rural Development strongly supported making decisive progress in the development and consolidation of RP at the EU level (ENRD, 2017). Furthermore, the European Network for Rural Development has focused its attention on and analysed the concept of RP in detail in the same publication.

The European Commission's *Communication on A Long-Term Vision for the EU's Rural Areas* (European Commission, 2021), within the framework of the EU Rural Action Plan, adopted and expanded on the idea by explicitly recognising

the need to review EU policies through a rural lens, considering their potential impacts and implications on rural jobs and growth as well as development prospects, social well-being and equal opportunities for all, and the environmental quality of rural areas." Importantly, it also states, "The Commission invites Member States to consider implementing the rural proofing principle at the national, regional and local levels" (European Commission, 2021, p. 25).

Other references to the RP can be found in the Commission's *Communication on Better Regulation* (COM(2021) 219 final), which includes the commitment to strengthen the RP alongside the IA. Within this framework, the *Better Regulation Toolbox* devotes Tool #18 to identifying potential impacts and verifying the need for TIA, and Tool #34 to the TIA itself (European Commission, 2023). While this broader approach, which in theory offers a more comprehensive and integrated territorial perspective, is not necessarily negative, there is a risk that the specificities of the RP could become overly obscured—arguably, they are already overshadowed in the *Better Regulation Toolbox*.

The European Committee of the Regions has also been active in promoting the value of RP. For instance, it facilitated the comprehensive compilation and analytical publication *Rural Proofing – A*

Foresight Framework for Resilient Rural Communities, which, however, places significant emphasis on TIA methodologies (Gaugitsch et al., 2022). Additionally, it proposes a methodology that builds upon and is linked to the more established TIA methodology, specifically drawing on the ESPON Quick Check approach (Thomé et al., 2023).

In this context, the ENRD established a thematic group on RP and organised two major events (ENRD, 2022), which offered a more detailed understanding of how RP is conceived and applied across different countries, as well as within various organisations such as the OECD and the European Union itself. The work of this thematic group has generated several reflections of particular importance for the design, establishment, or implementation of an RP system (the main proposals are included in Annex 1). Furthermore, the outstanding contribution by Sanz et al. (2023) provides an in-depth analysis of the various initiatives undertaken to advance RP both within the EU and in Spain.

The experts engaged in the ENRD working group outline six key actions to make RP effective and meaningful. The first four should be addressed in the short term, while the final one is a consideration for policymakers to take into account over the long term. The first action highlights the critical importance of making a clear statement of strong and genuine commitment. The second focuses on the need to complement the usual negative narrative with a positive, shared vision of the situation, addressing the specific needs and role of rural areas, and providing clarity on how RP contributes to their development. The third action underlines the necessity of establishing clear and coordinated roles and responsibilities. The fourth action, although operational, is no less important: the development and production of a clear, simple, and understandable guide, supported by necessary complementary evidence. These actions are essential in the short term. However, in the medium and long term, policymakers and decision-makers must recognise that RP is not a one-time exercise. On the contrary, it is an ongoing process, requiring the sustainability of all associated mechanisms and procedures.

3 Towards a decalogue for rural proofing: key design and implementation aspects

It is worth taking a closer look at specific aspects of the RP, which are relevant for decision-making on the design and implementation of this mechanism in any country or region. The analysis of international experiences and the contributions of different experts (among others, OECD, 2011; Rewhorn, 2019; Sherry & Shortall, 2019; Atterton, 2022; DEFRA, 2022; ENRD, 2022; Gaugitsch et al., 2022; Sanz et al., 2023; Thomé et al., 2023; Bryce, 2024; Fernando et al., 2024; Spanish

Network for Rural Development [REDR], 2024; Esparcia, 2025), are the basis for the following insights on central aspects of the RP.

3.1 Mandatory vs. voluntary rural proofing and the critical role of decision-makers' commitment

It is often said that the first important decision in formalising RP is whether it should be mandatory or voluntary. There is little experience of mandatory RP (England since 2000, although it has been mandatory in Northern Ireland since 2016). If it is not mandatory, it is often seen as a weakness, because it is assumed to result in low commitment from some policymakers. However, there seems to be a greater consensus that, if optional, it has more advantages than disadvantages. The critical element remains the commitment and involvement of decision-makers. Indeed, it seems easier and more effective to raise awareness, convince, involve and encourage proactive attitudes among such managers, so that they incorporate RP voluntarily, while fully understanding the benefits it brings.

When RP is mandatory, reactive attitudes may prevail over proactive ones. In these cases, RP is often viewed not only as something imposed and external but also as a mere administrative-technocratic exercise. This vision could certainly be the prelude to chain failures, such as lack of interest in processes beyond merely complying with the minimum requirements (such as collecting of checklist-type information or completing similar questionnaires), not allocating sufficient financial resources, or not being interested in training human resources in their departments and assigning them specifically to RP (which could be seen as a detraction of resources for "their" own policies).

It should be noted, therefore, that an optional RP, without the necessary engagement, loses much of its potential benefits. However, it is also true that a mandatory RP does not guarantee the required engagement. This is partly because there are no formalised systems for penalising a lack of engagement, beyond the reputational cost to the involved policymakers. This reputational cost is often cited as practically the only possible penalty for a lack of engagement and collaboration by the policymakers, as developing and implementing penalty systems would be highly complex and could generate such a backlash that it would undermine the involvement of policymakers.

3.2 Training in the Rural Proofing ecosystem

Closely related to all of the above is the preparation and training of the people who make up the RP ecosystem, starting with the decision-makers and policymakers, who must have a solid understanding of rural issues, which should be extended to the team responsible for the day-to-day management of the RP. The departments should form teams that are familiar with the complexity

and diversity of the processes that take place in rural areas, and obviously they must also have the necessary training for monitoring and evaluation tasks. To this end, they should gain experience in specific methodologies, both quantitative and qualitative, depending on how the RP is oriented in each case. There is a risk that those in charge of these departments may see the setting up and maintenance of these teams (which may be seen as extraneous external elements) as a superfluous expense. However, it is also true that their presence would be a guarantee for the department to effectively carry out its RP duties.

3.3 Structure and governance

The previous points lead to another crucial issue: the structure of the RP team(s) and their placement within the organisational framework. The central question here is where the RP teams should be established —whether it is more appropriate to create teams within each department or, alternatively, to establish a large, highly professionalised team in one department that provides guidance to the other departments. Naturally, there are many potential variations between these two extremes.

International experiences show that the second option is the most common, although this is likely because the departments responsible for rural development have been the most interested and the real drivers of RP. Finland, for example, stands out for the very active encouragement from the department responsible for rural development issues to the other departments with policies and programmes impacting rural areas. England, Scotland, and Finland are examples where RP teams, based in the rural department, have managed to raise awareness, mobilise, and involve public officials from other departments. However, this does not hide the fact that the receptiveness and enthusiasm of these other departments are typically low when they are invited —not forced— to implement RP activities in their departments. For them, these are “add-on” tasks, and the approaches are, from the outset, quite unfamiliar to them, often with no additional resources. Nevertheless, some experts argue in favour of this approach, recommending the creation and funding of a centre of expertise to support the relevant authorities in implementing RP (at whatever scale it is being carried out, be it national or regional) (Gaugitsch et al., 2022).

Despite the difficulties, from a ruralism perspective, it seems more appropriate for the various government departments to have rural teams (however modest), which would carry out a proper assessment and adaptation of the peculiarities of their policies and programmes (obviously with the necessary financial and human resources, as well as capacity-building). In the absence of large teams, it would undoubtedly be useful and necessary to have a sufficient structure capable of

providing the necessary feedback for the effective design, monitoring, implementation, and, where appropriate, readjustment of public policies for rural territories. If structures are present in the different departments, their coordination is not only advisable but essential. This is where the rural department teams can play a strategic and critical role in coordinating. Regardless of the structure a country or region is working with or will develop, it is equally fundamental to have complete clarity on the roles and responsibilities of each actor, as well as the feedback mechanisms between all the participants in the RP ecosystem.

3.4 The necessary interconnection between stakeholders at national, regional and local levels

The issue of scales has emerged as a critical factor in the successful implementation of RP. National, regional, and local levels are all indispensable for ensuring a proper functioning of it. The two main models discussed earlier (more or less centralised within a single department) and their possible variations are applicable at both the national level (as seen in France) and the regional level, particularly when regions have significant competences, such as in Spain or Germany.

Regardless of whether the primary competences lie at the national or regional level, the local level plays a fundamental and critical role for two main reasons. Firstly, it is at the local level that a wider range of stakeholders connected to rural dynamics, including rural residents themselves, can be effectively mobilised—incorporating a broader and more inclusive rural diversity. Secondly, as highlighted by various international experiences, such as in the English case (Rural Services Network, 2024), genuine RP cannot exist without the consultation and participation of representative stakeholders and local communities.

Therefore, when designing and implementing the RP mechanism, it is essential to establish a clear division of roles and responsibilities both horizontally (among departments, whether national or regional) and vertically (among the actors across national, regional, and local levels). This also includes defining the mechanisms for collaboration and communication between these levels (Nordberg, 2020). Nevertheless, it is important to acknowledge that local participation, while invaluable, comes at the cost of increased time requirements, as illustrated by the Finnish experience (Husberg, 2022).

3.5 Top-down vs. bottom-up approach

The top-down approach is characteristic of RP that is highly centralised within one or several ministerial departments, particularly at the national or regional level, and is not clearly complemented by RP initiatives at the local level. In this model, faster action is required, and a

more simplified approach is favoured, with verification instruments that are straightforward and efficient. One of its key strengths is its potential for direct policy influence, as it benefits from close proximity between departments. However, without a clear mandate from higher authorities (e.g., the prime minister) and robust feedback mechanisms from lower levels, its capacity to influence policies with real, lasting impact or make necessary adjustments may be limited.

Conversely, the bottom-up approach operates under less time pressure, allowing for more deliberate and well-rounded implementation of RP. This model is inherently more flexible, enabling the use of diverse instruments, ranging from simplified to more complex ones, which can be tailored to the specific circumstances or peculiarities of each region or rural area. Nevertheless, one of its main challenges lies in ensuring that the feedback generated reaches decision-makers at higher levels. When such feedback does reach these decision-makers, however, it can significantly enhance the adequacy and effectiveness of RP implementation or facilitate necessary adjustments.

The distinction between top-down and bottom-up approach aligns with what Bryce (2024) describes as a "shorter" versus an "expanded window." These terms refer to the timeframes allocated for the RP process: shorter periods imply faster implementation, while longer periods allow for a more thorough approach. The choice between these windows directly impacts the methodology, outcomes, and overall usefulness of the process.

In the top-down approach, the RP process can be completed more quickly, offering a simpler implementation. However, this comes with trade-offs: the outcomes may be less effective, and there is a risk of reducing the process to a mere technocratic or administrative exercise. Conversely, the bottom-up approach is more time-consuming and involves participatory methodologies. While it can yield more valuable results and better inform public policies and programmes, it introduces additional challenges. These include greater complexity, coordination difficulties, the need for extensive training, and a deep understanding of rural issues. There is also a higher risk of incomplete implementation. Therefore, it is crucial to define and communicate the goals and expectations of the RP process to all stakeholders from the outset. This includes clarifying the desired results, the anticipated advantages and limitations of the chosen approach, and, where relevant, the opportunity cost of not selecting the alternative.

3.6 When to launch the rural proofing process

In the light of international experiences, the answer to this issue is unanimous: it should be addressed in the early stages, that is, it must be present from the very conception of the public policy, through its design, development, implementation, and, where applicable, the review

phases (such as mid-term or final evaluations). It could be argued that the effectiveness of the RP mechanism follows a curve of decreasing returns, albeit with a non-uniform trajectory. Thus, when a policy or programme is designed and subsequently implemented without the corresponding RP analysis, a significant opportunity is clearly missed.

In this sense, ex-ante evaluations, in addition to being aimed at understanding the conditions under which the policy or programme will operate, could be expanded to include this initial and essential assessment through a rural lens. This would undoubtedly represent substantial progress. However, it is well understood that ex-ante evaluations have frequently become a diagnostic exercise required by regulation, one which does not always —or necessarily— exert a decisive influence on the design of public policy.

Whether or not the ex-ante phase has been fully utilised, mid-term evaluation phases often represent another critical point for RP. These phases require the establishment of a robust system of indicators to adequately monitor and assess developments from the moment of implementation to the point of review. Without delving into the distinctions between evaluation —conducted at specific points in time— and monitoring systems, which must operate continuously, the key issue is that such a system must enable a precise and systematic assessment of rural impact, regardless of whether it coincides with the mid-term evaluation.

Clearly, if this assessment is integrated into the evaluation, the resulting analysis is likely to be more comprehensive and practical, allowing for necessary adjustments during the remaining period of the policy or programme. Consequently, wherever feasible, the RP mechanism should be activated at the conception and design stages of policies and programmes. Where this is not possible, it should be implemented as early as practicable.

It is also imperative to have a system of indicators that ensures effective monitoring throughout. What remains evident is that conducting an RP exercise on a completed policy or programme is of limited utility. While it may provide insights for future initiatives, it will no longer be possible to make adjustments for that particular policy or programme during its operative period.

In any case, it is essential that public decision-makers are both clear about and committed to the fact that the RP must be a continuous mechanism. It is not a discrete or isolated exercise for a specific moment or policy. Rather, it is a way of designing and implementing public policies, with a focus on their effectiveness, and, in this particular case, on how we can deliver greater and more sustainable benefits to rural residents and their communities.

3.7 Communication and accountability

It is crucial to emphasise the importance of communication and, particularly, accountability, as with any public policy, but even more so in the case of the RP. Informing stakeholders, the general population, and rural residents in particular, will help them gain a much clearer understanding of what policies are being implemented in rural areas, why they are made, and how these policies are adapted and evolve in response to rural specificities. In several countries, such as England, considerable efforts have been made in recent years to produce regular RP reports. However, these reports should not simply be data-driven documents produced by the monitoring system. They must serve as tools for analysis and discussion, and should certainly involve those responsible for policies and programmes. Reporting to the House of Commons (in England) or establishing committees of parliamentarians within the RP mechanism are examples of accountability, ensuring that those most responsible for policy design are held to account.

While this is possible at both national and regional levels, accountability must also be ensured at the local level. For this to occur, a well-designed and sustained outreach and participation strategy must be in place, one that goes beyond information leaflets, where appropriate, or website updates. These tools should also empower local communities and their representatives to engage in analysis and debate, which may ultimately lead to proposals for improvements or adjustments. Therefore, accountability, both at the governmental (national and regional) and local community levels, also serves as a mechanism for legitimising both the RP exercise and the policies and programmes that impact rural areas. It is, therefore, entirely legitimate for national and regional decision-makers to seek to legitimise their policies within the framework of accountability.

3.8 Political- leadership

It is often assumed that the design and proper implementation of public policies and programmes result from perfectly refined mechanisms, and that if they are carried out successfully, it must be because they were inherently well designed. However, experience demonstrates that a critical factor is leadership. Without delving into the complexities and varieties of leadership types (Yukl, 2012; Northouse, 2018), one thing is certain: behind policies and programmes (particularly those that are well designed, effectively implemented, and yield positive outcomes), there is usually some form of leadership, whether individual or shared, more or less technocratic or political, collaborative or transactional, adaptive or charismatic. Sometimes leadership is more implicit; at other times, it is more explicit.

Certainly (RP), being a complex and somewhat uncommon mechanism in public policy, requires leadership, which will take different forms depending on the level of responsibility, the type of department, the scale, roles, objectives, political and social environment, and so on. In RP, attention should be paid to empowering the leadership of those actors who, at any level or scale, demonstrate a combination of knowledge, engagement, commitment, proactive attitude, and, of course, the skills and characteristics necessary to fully develop the potential of leading such a complex mechanism (if applied to its full potential). In leadership aimed at efficiency, due to its multi-scale, multi-actor, inter-ministerial, interdisciplinary nature, among others characteristics, negotiation, communication, and coordination skills must be prioritised. Therefore, only by leading within teams and integrating and articulating with external teams can they contribute all that effective leadership requires.

Finally, it should be noted that, alongside technical-administrative leadership, political leadership must be present at all levels in public policies and in processes as complex as a genuine RP. This is because political actors at every level have distinct roles, from ministers and even the president of the national government, or their counterparts in regional governments, to local public actors. Not only do they have the capacity to mobilise and involve other actors, but they can also initiate RP at the grassroots level, thereby enriching the entire process within the professional or technical spheres. For political leadership to be effective, another necessary condition must be met, although it is by no means sufficient: they must understand the usefulness, potential, and necessity of RP. Only in this way can public decision-makers internalise it, take ownership of the process, and ultimately lead it. Therefore, without political leadership, there can be no truly useful and effective RP.

3.9 Clearly understand the Rural Proofing and internalise it by taking ownership of the process

There is broad consensus that RP is a mechanism that, if well implemented, can have great potential and contribute to more effective policies regarding the quality of life for rural residents. It is generally assumed that all actors involved in the design and implementation of public policies impacting rural areas (who can be described as the newcomers to the rural ecosystem) share these ideas. However, this is not always the case, not only among intermediate technical staff specialising in different areas, but also among officials, particularly politicians. Often, they view a public policy mechanism as external to their sectoral sphere, and possibly their disciplinary tradition.

For this reason, it is also essential that leading politicians in the various departments have a proper understanding of what RP entails, i.e., they must be very clear about why (its justification, what it contributes) and for what purpose (its objectives, the expected results) RP should be implemented (then come the how and the when). Far from being a simple matter, this understanding represents another necessary precondition for political decision-makers, for the relevant authorities, to engage and commit themselves —that is, to carry out the process of designing and implementing RP and, if necessary, even lead it within their respective departments.

3.10 Addressing negative impacts, while also exploring positive potential

Up to this point, much emphasis has been placed on the RP approach as an analysis of implicitly negative impacts in order to inform and adjust public policies in rural areas. The situation of decline, or the difficulties faced by many rural areas (e.g. those with poor accessibility and the closure of private and public services), means that this is the first approach we tend to take. However, in some experiences, the narrative must also incorporate the positive dimension, as seen in Ireland, where this is heavily emphasised (Government of Ireland, 2021).

That is, asking the question and introducing the necessary analytical mechanisms into the process to determine how and to what extent rural territories, or certain policies, can contribute positively to other policies or programmes (e.g. through synergies not previously explored or developed). This more positive approach requires different perspectives and design, which are also necessary in the RP, although probably not the most urgent or important, at least in the short and medium term, and in the most depressed and vulnerable areas. However, it must be present in the medium and long term, especially considering the potential of rural areas in general for the development processes of the region or country, as well as of certain sectoral policies over others, depending on the specific scale or environment.

4 The emergence of rural proofing in Spain and its link to demographic and depopulation policies

4.1 Building the RP narrative: linking it to demographic perspective

Advances in other countries and, above all, recommendations from European institutions form the framework within which RP in Spain can be situated. The *Cork 2.0 Declaration* also served as a catalyst for discussions among professionals and academics about the utility and necessity of developing the RP mechanism. Since then, several significant experiences have emerged. Over the years, various studies have examined the potential for implementing RP in Spain or specific

regions (Domínguez, 2022; Picón, 2023; REDR, 2024). These studies have focused on two main aspects: RP as a tool for rural development and its incorporation into a demographic perspective (Fernando et al., 2024). The latter reflects the growing attention given to depopulation over the past decade, as well as the successive initiatives driven by European institutions. This emphasis was underscored by the European Parliament's Resolution on the *Deployment of cohesion policy instruments by the regions to cope with demographic change* (European Parliament, 2017; 2021), and the Opinion of the European Committee of the Regions about *Demographic change: proposals on measuring and tackling its negative effects in the EU regions* (Committee of the Regions, 2020). They highlighted the significance of demographic challenges in European rural areas, whether through net population loss or pronounced ageing processes.

The study by Sanz et al. (2023) offers a detailed and insightful analysis of RP, covering various aspects such as its concept and functionality, a concise review of comparative experiences, and the driving force provided by the EU. Regarding the Spanish context, the authors explore how RP has been closely tied to policies addressing the demographic challenge, the regulation of demographic impact assessments in legislation across several regions, and its inclusion in the Law on the Institutionalisation of Public Policy Evaluation (Law 27/2022). They conclude with a series of considerations and proposals that merit close examination when seeking to introduce or further develop RP within Spain's regulatory framework.

Alongside this publication, another comprehensive, diverse, and systematic analysis of RP in Spain was conducted by the G100, an interdisciplinary and inter-territorial working group supported by El Hueco-Soria, with collaboration from the Government of Navarre and the Spanish Federation of Municipalities and Provinces. In 2021 and 2022, the G100 undertook an engaging participatory reflection process. Initially, 14 subgroups were organised into five key thematic areas, resulting in a series of diagnoses and *71 proposals to achieve fairer legislation for rural areas*. These proposals focus on improving quality rural services; providing affordable, efficient, and sustainable infrastructures; fostering strengthened and viable local economies (through innovation and entrepreneurship ecosystems, training, productive activity services, sustainable tourism, local trade, etc.); ensuring the sustainability of the rural environment; and promoting legislation and policies to empower rural areas. Both the diagnoses and the proposals provide valuable elements of analysis for decision-makers across various public policies (G100 Rural Proofing, 2021a, b).

The documents also present several recommendations, including the need for a Spanish RP tailored to the country's political and institutional culture, avoiding the direct transfer of other models. They

emphasize linking the Spanish RP with the EU's TIA framework, reflecting the EU's strong commitment to this approach, and ensuring a participatory process involving various ministerial and regional departments. However, the experts do not take a position on other fundamental governance aspects regarding the RP, noting these decisions should to be made. Key considerations include: first, whether the approach should be sectoral or horizontal; second, whether the RP should be implemented by national and/or regional governments or by an independent body; and third, whether to adopt a model with distributed responsibilities across multiple departments —requiring strong coordination, which becomes a crucial aspect— or a more centralized model where one department, typically responsible for rural development, assumes the primary role.

The G100 documents do not limit themselves to raising important aspects from the global perspective of the development of rural territories. The demographic challenge and, above all, the anti-depopulation policies, which were playing a very important role in those years in practically all regions, are very much present in them. Moreover, at the national level, that same year the government had approved its *Plan of 130 Measures to Address the Demographic Challenge* (Ministry for Ecological Transition and the Demographic Challenge [MITECO], 2021). In fact, this Plan introduced, for the first time at the central government level, the need to carry out a demographic impact assessment for the government's regulatory projects and plans. It also included a commitment to make gender and child impact reports compulsory, all in relation to the demographic challenge, so that the system of indicators would make it possible to analyse and guide the planning of certain public policies.

With regard to the effective introduction of RP mechanisms in legislation, Navarre is often cited as the pioneering region that promoted the introduction of RP, with the regional government being the main advocate and direct sponsor of the activities and proceedings of the G100. However, to date, what has essentially taken place in Navarre is the design of some programmes and measures that are being implemented in order to revise or improve certain aspects. However, no significant regulatory changes have been introduced, and, therefore, it cannot be said that a process of "legislative ruralisation" or the integration of the rural perspective into legislation is taking place, which is the essence of RP and was the goal, according to many statements from public officials.

However, there are some noteworthy contributions to legislation, which are more aligned with the introduction of the demographic impact perspective and analysis, rather than with the more ambitious goals of legislative ruralisation. For instance, the Law on Demographic Promotion in

Galicia (5/2021 of 2 February) incorporates the demographic perspective, providing guidelines for carrying out demographic impact analysis and foreseeing an annual report on the region's demographic situation, based on a system of specific indicators. In line with Galicia, the Principado of Asturias has enacted its Demographic Promotion Law (2/2024), introducing the mandatory demographic impact assessment report for all bills, decrees, and sectoral strategic plans processed by the regional government. The Law on Measures to Address the Demographic and Territorial Challenge in Extremadura (3/2022, of 17 March) introduces the demographic but also the territorial perspective, and provides guidelines on how to approach demographic and territorial impact analysis.

The regional government of Aragón has traditionally been particularly sensitive to the problem of depopulation, as it is one of the Spanish (and European) regions most severely impacted, especially in two of its three provinces. In this context, the Special Directive on Demographic Policy and Against Depopulation, originally established in 2017 (Decree 165/2017, of 31 October), was supplemented later on by the Synthetic Territorial Development Index (Gobierno de Aragón, various years). This index aims to not only improve the territorial differentiation of depopulation policies but also enhance the monitoring and evaluation of their effects. More recently, the regional government has taken a step forward with the enactment of the Law of Rural Dynamisation, which explicitly introduces RP:

It is established as the guiding principle of action, under which the Government of the Autonomous Community will promote and review all sectoral and socio-economic development policies, through the observation of the demographic change perspective and the fight against depopulation, the analysis of its real and potential impacts, and its effects on rural areas. Additionally, it will promote positive discrimination measures in rural areas determined in accordance with the delimitation criteria set out... in this law (Article 5, Law 13/2023, of March 30).

There are other initiatives that clearly incorporate RP into legislation, although progress in their practical application will only become evident in the coming years. This is the case in the Basque Country, where its Rural Development Law (7/2022) states

aims to influence the rural lens or monitoring approach linked to the oversight of institutional and sectoral policies regarding their alignment with the objectives and actions outlined in rural development policies ... The report by the department, once approved, will have binding force ... [it will be analysed] the adequacy of plans,

programmes, and institutional initiatives ... monitoring whether the needs, priorities, and sectoral objectives have been taken into account ... and indicating, where applicable, the content that must be modified or reviewed" (Rural Development Law 7/2022).

Another interesting initiative is the one related to Catalonia. Within the framework of the Rural Agenda, which various entities have been working on over the past few years, the proposal for the Rural Municipalities Statute Law has emerged (currently under parliamentary processing at the end of 2024). This explicitly includes the mandatory requirement for RP which, according to preliminary information, would be highly consistent (Parlamento de Catalunya, 2024).

In the Spanish context, there are, however, two particularly interesting cases, those of the regions of Castilla-La Mancha and Valencia, which deserve a slightly more detailed analysis.

4.2 Divergent regional experiences: regulatory advances in Castilla-La Mancha vs. policy dismantling in the Region of Valencia

The legislation in these two regions also shapes the RP approach to demographic impact and the efforts to address depopulation. Both laws were originally conceived and defined as highly effective instruments for adequately assessing and, where appropriate, guiding adjustments to public policies with a demographic perspective, particularly those affecting rural areas facing significant demographic challenges.

The first is the *Law on Economic, Social and Tax Measures to Address Depopulation and Promote Rural Development in Castilla-La Mancha* (Law 2/2021). This law mandates the inclusion of a demographic impact report in the procedures for drafting laws or minor regulations that develop these laws, as well as in plans and programmes processed by the regional government. Furthermore, it requires the mandatory integration of a gender perspective. Each department is responsible for incorporating both demographic and gender perspectives within the scope of its competencies, while adhering to the guidelines, criteria, and methodologies provided by the body responsible for addressing demographic challenges.

These guidelines represent the RP approach in the form of a checklist, which has a strong qualitative component, including specific questions. The methodological framework is primarily designed to assess the impact on two priority areas: sparsely populated rural areas and areas at risk of depopulation (previously defined in the regulations using precise criteria). Consequently, for all policy initiatives (regulations, plans, or programmes) promoted by any regional government

department, the preparation of a demographic impact report is mandatory. These reports must follow the structure outlined in Table 1.

Table 1. Demographic impact report on the draft regulations, plans and programmes of the government. Junta de Comunidades de Castilla-La Mancha

<ol style="list-style-type: none">1. Rationale: Identification, justification, and explanation of the objectives.2. Initial situation in the area to be regulated: A detailed examination of the current state, with a primary focus on the difficulties in the two types of priority areas, as well as in the rest of the region. This section should also analyse the extent to which the initiative aligns with the objectives or measures outlined in the Regional Strategy against Depopulation.3. Analysis of specific measures: If applicable, an evaluation of the specific measures for the two priority areas, including any positive incentives. In the absence of specific measures, the analysis should demonstrate how the general measures contribute to addressing the challenges faced by these areas.4. Assessment of the impact of measures: This includes consideration of potential negative impacts (e.g., challenges or disadvantages) in the priority areas, the removal of existing obstacles or imbalances, and possible improvements that could be introduced but were not initially foreseen in the Regional Strategy against Depopulation.5. Evaluation of the demographic impact: This should specify whether the impact is positive (including any measures not initially outlined in the Regional Strategy), negative (e.g., if challenges are unlikely to be resolved or if new issues arise that hinder public policy efforts against depopulation), or neutral.6. Integration of improvements into the final report: A summary of the measures incorporated and their impact on combating depopulation, with particular emphasis on the projected demographic impact—whether positive, negative, or neutral.
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Source: Resolución 24 de febrero (Junta de Comunidades de Castilla-La Mancha, 2022)

The second is the *Law on Comprehensive Measures to Address Depopulation and Promote Territorial Equity in the Region of Valencia* (Law 5/2023), which explicitly states in its title that its primary objective is to incorporate the perspective of the demographic challenge and depopulation. Additionally, the law introduces a particularly noteworthy concept that helps contextualise its approach: territorial equity. From this perspective, the law adopts an approach that extends beyond and encompasses the traditional rural perspective (Farinós, 2023). This broader focus is especially well-suited to the realm of public policies, as it facilitates the resolution of debates surrounding the definition of rurality and the diversity of rural contexts—issues highlighted in some RP-related documents from other countries.

In its original wording, the Law mandates the preparation of a *Rural Perspective Report on depopulation and territorial equity* for all draft laws and sectoral plans. This report must include

a prior assessment of the impact in terms of demographic challenge and territorial cohesion, focusing particularly on ensuring that the regulations and the development of the plans are suitable for the specific circumstances and administrative resources available in municipalities [at risk of depopulation].

Responsibility for drafting these reports lies with the departments proposing the respective law, plan, or programme, and they must be incorporated from the earliest stages of the legislative or planning process. As in the case of Castilla-La Mancha, the body responsible for anti-depopulation policies will issue guidelines, instructions, and methodologies for the preparation of this rural perspective report.

Moreover, the Law calls for the creation of a system of indicators, to be included in the annual regional budgets, that integrates the social and sectoral impacts of the budgetary policies. Expenditure specifically directed at anti-depopulation initiatives must be individualised, and a territorial characterisation must be provided for each budget line. This will enable a thorough assessment of their impact on the territorial dimensions of depopulation processes.

Law 5/2023 was the final piece of legislation passed by the regional Parliament of Valencia, prior to the regional elections and the subsequent shift in government—from the progressive coalition led by the Socialist Party to a right-wing administration formed by the conservative Popular Party and the far-right Vox party. Since then, the law has seen minimal implementation, although one significant amendment has been introduced, targeting the RP approach and its application. Specifically, key words and phrases have been removed from the article concerning the perspective report on depopulation. This amendment, in effect, eliminates fundamental elements and significantly undermines the core principles required for such a report, departing from the standards of a comprehensive and modern RP approach (see Table 2).

These amendments are part of a broader package of so-called “administrative simplification” (Decreto-ley 7/2024). In practice, this involves the total or partial dismantling—either explicitly or implicitly—of a significant number of regulatory instruments. For the purpose of this so-called simplification, many of the specific instruments outlined in various regulations are being replaced by more generic ones, among which the *Regulatory Impact Analysis Report* stands out (which, in some cases, may be simplified into an “abbreviated report”). It is stated that this report must compulsorily accompany all regulatory projects, “justifying their timeliness and necessity and

estimating their impact on different areas". However, this report could be significantly "watered down", meaning that the former *Report on the Rural Perspective on Depopulation and Territorial Equity*, now renamed the *Report on the Perspective on Depopulation*, may be substantially diluted.

Table 2. Aspects removed by the Government of the conservative Partido Popular and far-right Vox from Law 5/2023, of 13 April, on *Comprehensive Measures Against Depopulation and for Territorial Equity in the Region of Valencia*. Generalitat Valenciana.

1. The mandatory requirement for an ex-ante evaluation.
2. The inclusion of territorial cohesion in this evaluation (which made the law almost unprecedented, as it was designed with broader and more consistent territorial terms).
3. The compulsory nature of stakeholder consultation (a particularly serious omission, marking a clear regression from the participatory approaches commonly found across the EU in the development of rural territories).
4. The deadline for the submission of guidelines, instructions, and methodologies to support the drafting of the report (previously set at two months from the approval of the law), meaning that, without these guidelines—whose timeline may now be indefinitely extended—no department will be able to implement RP initiatives.
5. The obligation to create a system of indicators, which would enable the integration of social and sectoral impacts (without which neither monitoring nor proper evaluation are possible).
6. The requirement to individualise expenditure for active policies combating depopulation (without which there is no specific legal commitment to fund these policies).
7. The obligation to conduct territorial characterisation for the other sectoral policies (which will not only hinder the assessment of territorial impacts on depopulation, but will also make it highly difficult to establish the necessary prioritisation or territorial discrimination of policies).

Source: own elaboration from Decreto-ley 7/2024, del Consell de la Generalitat Valenciana

Moreover, this new report will be a weakened instrument, as its application is no longer mandatory for policies included in the Budget Law—a fundamental document that annually defines the scope and real commitment of government public policies. Additionally, there is mention of the approval of the Methodological Guide for the drafting of this Report, but no specific guidelines are provided regarding its content, scope, or the timeframe in which it will be available, nor when its use will become mandatory.

In short, this is a clear example of how the removal of just over a hundred words from a law can fundamentally alter its essence. By doing so, it undermines commitments and obligations that were crucial to what was originally intended to be a cutting-edge, modern, and EU-compliant approach to RP in this area.

4.3 Towards a National Framework: Rural Proofing in the Law for Institutionalising Public Policy Evaluation

There has been little progress towards the effective introduction of rural proofing (RP) in Spanish legislation. At the national level, the main reference point is Law 27/2022, which has generated significant interest within Spain's RP ecosystem. This law focuses on institutionalizing public policy evaluation within the Central Government. Specifically, it declares that

The Government will promote a Rural Guarantee Mechanism, ensuring the participation of stakeholders in its design and implementation [and will include] the incorporation of the evaluation of the territorial effects of public policies on the environment and rural society ... as well as the development of a specific evaluation methodology that considers the principles, recommendations, and tools proposed by the European Union in this field.

From these provisions, the government's commitment to introducing RP at the national level appears evident. However, little progress has been made on key aspects, such as methodology, beyond the experience and expertise accumulated by certain central government departments (e.g., the Secretary of State for Public Administration, 2024).

A different issue concerns the responsibility for monitoring and evaluation. In this regard, the Law provides for the establishment of the National Agency for the Evaluation of Public Policies, which is intended to replace the former National Agency for the Evaluation of Public Policies and Quality of Services, dissolved in 2017 under the conservative Popular Party government. As of late 2024, however, the new Agency has not yet been established, and its functions are currently carried out by the Institute for the Evaluation of Public Policies (2024).¹ The inclusion of a specific body responsible for evaluation tasks at the central government level helps to clarify certain uncertainties regarding the structure and mechanisms that rural proofing (RP) might rely on in Spain.

1 More information available at <https://funcionpublica.digital.gob.es/evaluacion-politicas-publicas.html>

Moreover, the Law contains some novelties that clarify and establish the framework for conducting evaluations (La Moncloa, 2022). First, it mandates the creation of a system of indicators for monitoring, applicable across all Central Government departments. Second, evaluations will be conducted by teams external to the body responsible for the policy under review. Third, ex-ante evaluation will be strengthened, a practice already nearly mandatory for most policies involving European funds. Fourth, departmental coordination units will be established to oversee evaluation activities within each ministry. Fifth, interdepartmental coordination will be managed by a High Evaluation Commission. Sixth, training plans in public policy evaluation will be developed for public officials. Finally, civil society, organisations, and associations will be encouraged to participate through the creation of the General Evaluation Council.

In addition to the Government's Strategic Evaluation Plan (developed every four years), the Law provides for the implementation of a departmental Evaluation Plan (biennial), introducing the mandatory ex-ante and ex-post evaluation of policies deemed most relevant by each department. For policies lasting four years or more, an interim evaluation will also be required.

In conclusion, while the framework appears attractive, the question remains whether its development will result in the genuine and effective introduction and implementation of rural proofing at the central government level. Alternatively, the framework risks being reduced to a merely formal requirement, subject to the discretionary will of political decision-makers in the various departments, despite its mandatory nature.

5 Conclusions and final remarks on rural proofing (in Spain): (un)founded expectations?

Throughout the previous sections, we have attempted to address several objectives, from which multiple ideas can be extracted. The first is the confirmation that, within the European Union, we are indeed witnessing the emergence of a highly powerful mechanism that fundamentally focuses on considering the various dimensions of public action in rural areas. In other words, something as simple, yet at the same time as complex, as the integrated territorial approach, or place-based approach, which was first articulated more than 30 years ago in the context of the former Community Initiative LEADER. The fact that, several decades later, we are still attempting to design mechanisms to tackle this enormous challenge serves as an indication that, over the course of these decades, public policies in general —and the rural ecosystem in particular— have failed to turn this integrated territorial approach into a tangible reality. However, this does not diminish the importance or relevance of this new attempt to reformulate the integrated approach, now under

the framework of RP, as there are international experiences that highlight that significant progress is possible.

Therefore, the second objective has been to define the necessary and essential elements that should constitute an effective, consistent, comprehensive, and almost ideal RP, making it a powerful instrument for intervention in public policies. The analysis of international experiences has enabled the formulation of a decalogue of key ideas. However, it must not be forgotten that these same experiences highlight the fact that there are no completely successful examples in real life, but also that, if applied correctly, RP has enormous potential for progress.

The core of the paper was dedicated to analysing RP in Spain. Consequently, it has been found that in Spain, we are not progressing towards a broad conception of RP. Instead, due to the emergence of depopulation as a political issue, our particular RP is primarily focused on the demographic perspective and policies aimed at combating depopulation. This is a distinctive feature that sets us apart from the RP implementation processes in neighbouring countries. Furthermore, we have observed very different approaches, not only in response to this demographic focus, but mainly in the conception and introduction of our specific RP.

Specifically, the case of Castilla-La Mancha has been analysed, where a compulsory and centralised RP concept has been introduced in the department in charge for policies against depopulation. However, and this is important and distinctive, it resides in the vice-presidency of the regional government, i.e., above all the sectoral departments. With an initially very similar origin and path, the case of the Region of Valencia has been considered, which even approved a more ambitious and comprehensive legislative framework in mid-2023. However, the political shift from a progressive government to one led by the right and the far-right has led to the de facto dismantling of the essence of this legislative instrument by mid-2024. This suggests, if not total failure, at least an RP far removed from the theoretical reference framework, which, in any case, will have to be assessed in the coming years.

Finally, fifthly, another element has been introduced into the regulatory framework which, for the time being, can only serve as an important support for an effective RP within the central government framework. This is the Law on the Institutionalisation of Public Policy Evaluation (Law 27/2022), which expressly introduces mandatory RP in central government policies.

In summary, in Spain, we are constructing different frameworks for different RPs, which operate at varying speeds and have different levels of ambition with respect to the theoretical RP —ranging from the more restricted, focused on the demographic perspective, to the more ambitious to which

the central government is gradually opening up. But what is certain is that, especially in the rural ecosystem, the wave of RP has generated enormous expectations. From the modest analysis contained in this paper, however, we believe that, while continuing to work on developing an RP that is ambitious, coherent, comprehensive, efficient, effective, and, above all, that clearly contributes to improving the lives of rural residents, we must also remain realistic.

Indeed, being realistic means being aware of the enormous limitations of such an ideal RP, and the facts demonstrate these limitations. The first limitation focuses on the tremendously slow progress that political vicissitudes are imposing on the entire process of designing and implementing an RP, as it is being conceived within the rural, Spanish, and European ecosystem. These political vicissitudes directly condition the level of commitment from public policymakers and, consequently, the presence or absence of leadership within national and regional governments to advance along the path of the desired RP. However, not everything can be attributed to political vicissitudes.

The second limitation refers to the fact that public administration tends to be a heavy and slow-moving machinery. This explains why, despite the emergence of the RP in the EU, we still do not have this mechanism in place, not even in the central government, and practically only in one regional government, and limited to the demographic perspective (without effectively implementing key aspects, such as consulting local stakeholders).

The third limitation concerns the necessary and fluid coordination and feedback, which remain uncertain. This coordination involves the agency officially responsible for evaluating the RP, with its methodological expertise (the National Agency for the Evaluation of Public Policies), and the departments that have accumulated experience and knowledge in rural issues and depopulation policies. In the first case, the responsibility officially resides with the Ministry of Agriculture, which is in charge of implementing the territorial approach to rural development. The second is the Ministry for Ecological Transition and the Demographic Challenge (MITECO), which deals with depopulation policies. We do not yet know what these coordination mechanisms will look like or how fluid they will be, beyond the Higher Council within the National Agency. It will certainly be a challenge to establish truly fluid and effective coordination and feedback mechanisms.

The fourth limitation concerns the distribution of competencies, which means that, despite the good intentions, promising prospects, and even some leadership in the central government, its competencies are certainly limited. It is the regional governments that bear primary responsibility for introducing a truly consistent RP. However, the trajectories of recent years, the changes in many

regional governments relatively recently, and the evidence of where at least some of these new governments are headed (as in the case of the Region of Valencia) do not inspire high expectations for a rapid shift towards a consistent RP. There is neither the commitment, nor the leadership, nor, likely, the necessary understanding of the critical role and importance that this mechanism can play in improving the quality of life of the population and the development of rural areas.

There is a positive element to acknowledge: the commitments and a certain leadership in the central government (sectoral departments, MITECO, as well as the presidency of the government), which, hopefully, would soon lead to the formation and implementation of a consistent and truly comprehensive RP. Consequently, the question posed in the title of this paper, “Rural proofing (in Spain): (un)founded expectations?”, can, at present, be answered with a slight modification to the title, but one which implies a significant change in its meaning: “Rural proofing (in Spain)-: unfounded expectations”.

Acknowledgements: This publication is part of the R&D&i project PID2020-114554RB-I00, funded by the Ministry of Science and Innovation (MCIN), National Research Agency (AEI/10.13039/501100011033/). The autor thanks the anonymous reviewers for their valuable suggestions and comments, which have contributed to improving the original version of this article.

Authorship statement: The author declare no conflict of interest.

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