

SOCIETY AND RURAL DEVELOPMENT IN CASTILLA Y LEÓN (SPAIN): A PUBLIC OPINION ANALYSIS

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Rural areas in Spain have been affected by a set of economic, demographic and social transformations, mainly caused by the crisis in the ways of life of traditional economies and societies based on agricultural activities. The most relevant effect of these changes is the migration of rural population to urban areas, that has involved an aging and a negative vegetative growth of the remaining rural societies located in villages and smallest towns located far away from main economic centres. All these processes of change have particularly affected to regions where the primary sector has had a larger relative weight, as is the case of the Autonomous Community of Castilla y Leon (Spain).

In order to face these situations that jeopardize future viability of rural communities, governments have been compelled to implement different economic and social policies focused in the rural development. Although the first actions implemented to support rural areas started in the seventies, the real political interest in rural area problems can be dated more recently in the nineties, when the European Union began to pay special attention and support to these territories. At the beginning most of rural development measures were focused on the agricultural sector, considering that the improvement of the competitiveness of this sector were the best option to maintain rural societies. However, nowadays this idea has changed, and rural strategies are currently linked with the concept of sustainability, that involves economic, social and environmental perspectives of the whole set of activities performed in rural areas.

Considering this new approach for the rural development policy, the new budget plan for 2007-2013 in the European Union has created the Agricultural European Fund for Rural Development (FEADER) as only way of financing actions implemented to encourage development of rural areas. This Fund is structured in three axes or group of measures: i) the competitiveness of agricultural activities and agroindustries; ii) the improvement of the environmental; and iii) the diversification of the rural economy and the improvement of the quality of life of rural population.

Within this new conception for the rural development policy, each State member has certain degree of manoeuvre to distribute the available financial resources among each one

of the action axis mentioned above. However, this must be done considering a rigid budget discipline, as the global amount of money supporting these measures has substantially diminished compared with precedent periods. At the same time, the different stakeholders involved rural development policy (agricultural managers and their organizations, environmentalist groups, local development groups,...) are competing for those scarce budget resources with the purpose of achieving their own interests. All these circumstances make the governance of rural areas a very difficult task. This is why public opinion about the design, implementation and evaluation of rural development strategies is worth to be taken into account. In fact this kind of analysis is the best way to guarantee that this policy really became a policy focused in improving the whole society's welfare. In this sense, public opinion became in a really useful source of information, which public decision makers should incorporate in the design of rural policies, trying to facilitate the necessary consensus regarding the budgetary allotment and thus, the effectiveness of different measures.

Considering this framework, the objective of the paper is to analyse the public opinion in Castilla y León about the rural development policies. The information obtained in this sense can be considered interesting to identify which are the main problems perceived by the society regarding rural areas, which objectives are considered more relevant by the public in order to guide the rural development policy and which are the most valuable instruments and measures to improve rural population's quality of life. All this information could allow an improvement in the design and the implementation of rural policies, promoting that this policy could face citizens' concerns better.

In order to reach the proposed objective, we have developed a survey that has been implemented by asking a representative sample of individuals resident in the Autonomous Community of Castilla y León. The questionnaire elaborated for this survey is mainly based on close questions that try to collect the public perception regarding different key issues of the rural development policy. Furthermore, interviewees have been questioned about their personal characteristics (socioeconomic variables as age, habitat of residence, level of studies, etc.) with the purpose of establishing relationships between different public opinions and the population's profile. With the information gathered by the survey, first a descriptive statistic analysis has been implemented. Later on, a refined study has been carried out by using different multivariate statistical techniques, implemented to analysis heterogeneity in individuals' responses.

Regarding the results obtained, first it is worth pointing out that most of the individuals share the idea that the socioeconomic situation of rural areas in the region is rather problematic. Considering this social concern about the problems of rural communities, it can be commented that more than a half of the interviewees perceive the necessity of the public intervention through specific measures focused in the economic and social reactivation of these territories. Although this widespread opinions, most of regional population has a small degree of knowledge about what is the 'rural development policy' and which are its most important instruments.

In this way, individuals believe that the rural policy implemented up to now has had a weak effectiveness in reaching the public objectives related with the assurance of the future viability of rural areas. Furthermore, a majority of citizens thinks that it is convenient to

continue implementing strategies and actions designed in order to avoid the continuous economic decline of rural communities, promoting the employment generation and fixing population in the territory. These perceptions are mainly felt by those interviewees who live in urban environments, with high or average incomes and high educational levels. This evidences that the demands of these individual living in cities are the ones that are conditioning the implementation of public policies regarding rural areas. Indeed, the growing level of environmental concerns, the preference toward small villages like places for leisure time or even for a second residence, or the demand for quality and healthy foods by urban dwellers are shaping the evolution of the rural areas, as a symbol of the change of values experienced in the last decades towards a post-materialist society.

Regarding the objectives that the citizenship considers should guide rural development policy, a very precise hierarchy of preferences has been obtained. In this sense, social objectives have been considered the most relevant ones (employment generation and endowment of public infrastructures and services in rural environments), as an unequivocal indication that, in opinion of the individuals, keeping enough population in rural area is a *sine qua non* constraint to achieve any degree of develop. Next, the second most important objectives are the economic ones, either through the support of agricultural activities or any other type of activities in these territories. Finally, the less important objectives to be achieved are those related with the environmental and cultural heritage protection. This ranking in society's preferences can be explained by taking into account the widespread idea that basic needs required to be fulfilled before opting for the attainment of any other type of non-material requests.

To reach the previous objectives, and closely linked with them, the population of Castilla y León considers that the most useful instruments would be those of social character, that is, those promote the improvement of the quality of life of rural inhabitants (improvement of public infrastructures and communications —roads or internet— and a further development in the endowment of social services —education and health facilities—). Following the ranking of importance, the second most valued measures are the economic ones, such as the promotion of the agricultural industries, the support of other economic activities different than farming ones (i.e., rural tourism) or the modernization of the agricultural holdings. Finally, the instruments considered less important have been those related with the environmental protection, such as the implementation of strict agricultural good practices codes or the creation of protected natural spaces.

Dealing with the practical implementation of the rural development policy, the individual have shown a scarce knowledge about the main development schemes currently implemented in favour of the rural areas. In fact, only 25% of the population has ever heard about the European Union's initiative LEADER or the national program PRODER. Nevertheless, individuals that have revealed that they really know these schemes have expressed a very positive opinion about their results.

Regarding with the institutional management of this policy, regional public opinion support the idea that the administrations closer to the people, that is, local governments as municipalities and regional authorities, should be the ones in charge of its implementation. Opposite, role of the European Union and the national government should be limited to the supply the budget required to fund this policy. This opinion is also linked with the

public assessment of the performance of each institution. In fact municipalities and regional government has been considered the most valued administrations regarding rural development policies, been the national government the worst valued one.

The questionnaire has also questioned about the society's demand about this type policies. The results obtained in this way show that a majority of individuals thinks that public budget allocated rural development should be increased. However, the willingness to pay in order to enhance this policy is quite small. In fact, only one fourth of the interviewees would be willing to support economically this type of measures through the payment of additional taxes. As a conclusion of this exercise of contingent valuation can be claimed that there exists a wide gap between the amounts of money the society is willing to contribute and the real necessities for the implementation of an effective rural policy.