

12. The social problem of rural depopulation in Spain and Portugal

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INTRODUCTION

The phenomenon of rural depopulation leads to demographic, economic and territorial imbalances and serious social problems. It is the origin of rural crisis, which has led to a constant decline in the weight of agriculture in the rural economy and a decline in income from agriculture. This circumstance has produced poor living and working conditions in rural areas. Political institutions have tried to resolve the problem of depopulation through measures for sustainable development from an economic, demographic and environmental perspective.

In this chapter, we look at rural depopulation in Spain and Portugal from a quantitative perspective. Using secondary data obtained from diverse official sources, we examine the problems resulting from the loss of population in rural areas. Population decline requires a reconversion of rural space. In this sense, we discuss how public authorities hope to convert rural zones into “multifunctional” spaces, and spaces of consumption, in part by attempting to meet the demand of urban populations for recreation and tourism.

The comparative study of the demographic situation of rural areas in Spain and Portugal that we carry out in this chapter is, in our judgment, of relevance for the elaboration of public policies for local development that aim to improve the social well-being of rural populations and to foster greater economic dynamism in depressed rural areas. To do this, we carry out an analysis of the main sociodemographic characteristics of rural areas in Spain and Portugal with the aim of examining their demographic sustainability. We emphasize that the significant depopulation in these areas causes social, demographic and economic problems not only for these areas, but for the broader society. The loss of population in rural areas results in the withdrawal of educational and social services, as well as others related to security, transport and commerce, all fundamental for the development of these areas.

We also provide a descriptive analysis using available information of specific rural areas in Spain and Portugal. This analysis is based on census data from the National Statistics Institute of each country and the Database of Contemporary Portugal (PORDATA, n.d.). The variables used are a childhood index, youth index, aging index and dependency index.

For the comparative aspect of our study we refer to homogeneous regions (Cabugueira, 2000), which are defined by their uniformity. In effect, the border regions (Spanish regions mentioned first in each pair) of Galicia/Minho, Castille and Leon/Trás-os-Montes e Alto Douro, Extremadura/Alentejo and Andalusia/Algarve can be compared because they share similar physical and geographic characteristics as well as similar natural resources (Ribeiro, Lautensach & Daveau, 1991). The Canary Islands and Balearic Islands in Spain and the Azores and Madeira in Portugal are compared as well because of their island character.

THE DIFFICULTY OF DEFINING WHAT IS RURAL

Urbanization, industrialization and technological evolution have led to spatial, functional and socioeconomic changes in the rural world, influencing our definition of the latter (Sharpley & Sharpley, 1997). These transformations are reflected in the loss of economic value of agriculture and forestry and have provoked a divorce between younger generations and agricultural practices, affecting the survival and sustainability of the rural world.

We define the rural world along the lines of Cunha (2004, p. 247), as “the space not directly polarized or enveloping metropolitan areas or large cities, normally being defined in function of its lower population density and the greater relative importance of agriculture in the economy and society”. Although there is no universal definition of rural areas, national governments use specific criteria to define them. According to Lane (1994 apud Roberts and Hall, 2001) they are based on three main characteristics: population density/size, the economy and land use, and the existence of traditional social structures.

While rural areas in both Portugal and Spain generally have low population densities and relatively small settlements, these criteria do not apply in the same way in all countries (for example, in China and India). In addition, if rural areas tend to be distinguished by traditional agricultural and forestry activities, and often extractive activities as well, the emergence of new activities in rural zones in this post-industrial period, such as tourism, must be recognized.

Regarding traditional structures and social values, the widespread perception exists that rural areas are grounded in a sense of community, in the predominance of a local culture rather than a cosmopolitan one, and in a slow, more “natural” way of life in communion with nature and less materialistic

(Lane, 1994 apud Roberts and Hall, 2001). The countryside is perceived, on the one hand, as an abandoned and marginalized space because of the loss of the social and economic importance of agriculture, and, on the other, as an idyllic place for contact with a country life connected to nature and associated with authenticity and tranquility (Eusébio, Carneiro, Kastenzholz, Figueiredo & Silva, 2017). This is a reinvention of rural space as a place of representation that follows a process of *touristification* and *patrimonialization* (Reis, 2012).

The EU's Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) has principal responsibility for the regulation of the rural landscape, and has undergone numerous modifications in recent decades. In effect, it has enacted rural development strategies in an attempt to avoid socioeconomic stagnation and environmental degradation in rural areas.

Regarding an operational definition of the rural world, we use the definition of the National Statistics Institutes of Spain and Portugal for the habitat marking the limit between rural and urban areas and based on the following methodology: An area is considered rural in both Spain and Portugal if it has a population density equal to or below 100 inhabitants per square kilometer and does not include any place with a resident population equal or superior to 2,000 persons (TIPAU, 2014). For intermediate zones in Spain, the figure is between 2,000 and 9,999 inhabitants, and in Portugal it is between 2,000 and 4,999 inhabitants. Urban areas are considered those with more than 10,000 inhabitants in Spain and more than 5,000 inhabitants in Portugal.

Although we do not consider the number of inhabitants alone to define rural areas, as there are other important characteristics, as we have indicated, we use this definition here to determine our object of study. In addition, we must note that Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) typology (2011) classifies "local units" as rural if their population density is below 150 inhabitants per square kilometer. While this is the most commonly used criteria at the European level, we do not have demographic data available based on this figure. To obtain such information we would have to study each geographic area municipality by municipality, an issue beyond the purview of this study.

THE SOCIAL PROBLEM OF DEPOPULATION AND THE RURAL CRISIS IN SPAIN AND PORTUGAL

Rural depopulation as a social problem consists in the decline in the number of inhabitants in a determined area in relation to a previous period and can be the result of negative vegetative growth (deaths outnumber births), of a negative migratory balance (out-migration is greater than immigration), or of both at the same time (CES, 2018).

During the 1960s and the beginning of the 1970s, Portugal experienced an intense rural exodus toward urban centers (and emigration to other countries in Europe as well), losing a significant part of its agricultural labor force (Avillez, 2015). In 1970, the urban population accounted for 77 percent of the country's total population. This process resulted in the concentration of approximately two-thirds of the population on the coast between Braga and Aveiro and between Leiria and Setúbal (Silva, Lima & Chamusca, 2010). This rapid urbanization led to the depopulation of the rural interior of the country, as young people went to the cities, leaving agriculture under the charge of older generations (Águas & Antunes, 2017).

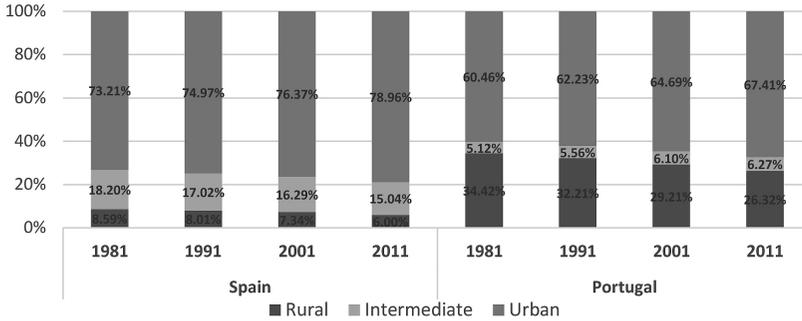
As a result, the rural world in Portugal has suffered a crisis manifested in the constant decline in the participation of agriculture in the economy, in the decline in agricultural profits, in the general incapacity to attract investment from other sectors, in unattractive living and working conditions, and in environmental problems related to contamination, the rural exodus, erosion and forest fires (Cunha, 2004 apud Cavaco, 2004).

Rural abandonment intensified with the implementation of the CAP at the end of the 1980s (Eusébio et al., 2017). In fact, the CAP has not provided an adequate response to the reality of Portuguese agriculture and made sustainable development in rural areas more difficult (Alberto and Almeida, 2011).

The Spanish rural environment is significant in the geographic configuration of the country, encompassing 85 percent of the country's territory and 20 percent of the population. In the past decade, this rural society has experienced both deep demographic and socioeconomic changes; some rural areas are in decline while others are experiencing major growth (MAPAMA, 2010). Although the rural population is distributed throughout the country, the regions of Navarre, Castilla–La Mancha, Aragon and Castille and Leon stand out, as they contain almost 90 percent of the rural population (CES, 2018). Rural regions are characterized by the following dynamics (García Sanz, 2003):

population decline and depopulation of certain areas reaching losses close to or above 40 percent; in interior areas this process began in the 1950s. This depopulation has been selective (proportionally more young people and women) and has diverse causes; some are economic, such as the decline in the importance of agriculture and the lack of economic dynamism, which has led to emigration, and others are demographic, such as the decrease in birth rates due to a decline in the number of women of childbearing age. (Camarero, 2009)

In Figure 12.1 we see a drop in rural populations in both countries. In Spain, the population in rural towns and villages declined by almost 13 percent from 1981 to 2011, while in Portugal the decline was more than double, 26.32 percent.



Source: Authors based on figures from the Population Censuses of the National Statistics Institutes (INE) of Spain and Portugal.

Figure 12.1 Evolution of the population percentages of both rural and urban areas in Spain and Portugal with respect to the total population (1981–2011)

Population loss has led to an imbalance in the age structure of the rural population. The progressive aging of the population, related to the increase in longevity and the birth of increasingly smaller cohorts, has generated significant concern given the possibility that the age pyramid will no longer be a pyramid and become inverted, provoking what some refer to as the *rectangularization of mortality* and a *demographic earthquake* (Wallace, 2000).

In analyzing the population pyramid we see how a narrowing of the base of the pyramid exists due to the decline in the birth rate. A *Childhood Index* shows the number of children (0 to 14 years of age) per 100 inhabitants; in rural Portuguese municipalities they constitute 14.11 percent of the inhabitants versus 15.02 percent in urban zones, while in Spain the figures are 10.86 percent and 14 percent respectively. These figures are not a reason for optimism regarding the future of rural areas. A *Youth Index* (persons 15 to 29 years of age) presents similar results, with the figure for Spain being 14.1 young persons per 100 inhabitants and for Portugal, 16.43.

Regarding persons 65 years of age and older, Spain has an *Aging Index* of 27.08 in rural municipalities and 16.06 in urban ones. Projections for 2050 point to an increase in this figure according to Spain’s statistical institute, which forecasts that approximately 30.8 percent of the total population will be in this age group (Atance, García Corral, Martínez Jávega, Pujol & Urruela, 2010). In Portugal the aging index for the rural population is 21.85 per 100 inhabitants, versus 17.53 in urban areas.

In addition, we should point out that the support generation¹ (35–54 years of age) constitutes 31.8 percent of the total population in Spain, while in rural

areas it is only 7.73 percent. In Portugal, the figures are similar for rural (28.51 percent) and urban (28.81 percent) areas, which is quite positive for the future sustainability of the rural population.

Looking at the presence of men and women, we see that rural Spain had a sex ratio of 109 men for every 100 women in 2011, with the exception of those 65 years of age and up, where the number of men was below that of women (87 men for every 100 women) due to the longer life expectancy of women. In urban areas the ratio is 96 men for every 100 women. According to Sorokin and Zimmerman (1992), the rural world is becoming masculine due to selective migration processes; more women migrate to urban areas due to the specific demand for female labor power. This situation leads to significant problems of generational replacement, as there is an absence of women of reproductive ages.

Rural areas in Portugal are feminized, as they have a sex ratio of 94 men for every 100 women. This is a result of the number of women at reproductive ages not declining between 1950 and 2011. However, in geographic terms, areas of low density have a low female population at reproductive ages due to regressive variations, which impacts the reproductive cycle independently of fertility levels. The systematic variation of the population at reproductive ages in the last 50 years in certain areas has resulted in a clearly dualized country, with metropolitan areas gaining in female population at reproductive ages and much of the territory of the country losing said population, including the great majority of medium-sized cities (Marques, Ribeiro, Maia and Santos, 2016).

The decompensation from the vegetative growth of rural areas is mainly due to the increase in death rates from the increase in aging, along with low fertility rates due to the delay in the age of emancipation, marriage and access to maternity. Thus, the short-term fertility indicator² at the national level in 2017 was 1.31 for Spain and 1.36 for Portugal, according to their respective statistical institutes, far from generational replacement³ (2.1) and it is clear that it will result in a loss in population in both rural and urban spheres, though with greater impact in the former.

The strangulation of the age pyramid has led to major social and demographic problems in rural areas, causing the gradual aging of support generations, decline in the size of the active population and a consequent increase in the economically dependent population, thus affecting demographic and economic sustainability.

The dependency index, which reflects the proportional weight of the inactive population (children and the elderly) with respect to the potentially active population, is of great significance, as it determines the financial cost of dependent persons. Rural municipalities have a dependency index of 79.12 percent in Spain and 56.31 percent in Portugal. This reveals the existence of

a small population at active ages, resulting from the lack of economic dynamism, which further weakens the economy in rural areas.

Analyzing the population dynamics of rural areas in both countries clearly reveals the crisis in the demographic and economic sustainability of the rural world. However, these spaces also have certain irreplaceable comparative advantages: their natural and historical endowments, their landscapes and traditions, as well as the “tacit and erudite knowledge of their populations” (Silva et al., 2010, p. 5), which can and should be taken advantage of by the tourist industry.

DEPOPULATION AND ABSENCE OF SERVICES AFFECTS SOCIAL COHESION IN RURAL AREAS

We have talked about the depopulation of rural areas in Spain and Portugal, examining demographic indicators and how they impact demographic sustainability. In addition, we cannot forget that the availability of infrastructures and economic, social, educational and cultural services in rural areas are in function of population.

Despite improvements, this generates an inequality in opportunities between rural and urban areas, which is worst in the places with the smallest populations and most damaging to those who are most vulnerable, which is often the elderly. The lack of facilities and services worsens the situation of rural inhabitants, increasing costs when they have to travel to obtain services (López and Salas, 2000).

Social inequalities and the under-provision of services in rural areas become part of a circular process of *local devitalization*, in which a determined demographic imbalance leads to a parallel economic and cultural imbalance and vice versa. Something similar occurs with the provision of economic, educational, transport and health services, among others, in comparison with more populated areas; they become victims of processes of productive rationalization provoked by negative population evolution (Cloke, 1987; Vachon, 1993), leading to the increasing isolation of rural areas.

Based on the Spanish INE’s Living Conditions Survey⁴ (INE, 2012) regarding household access to services (food, health care, public transport, banking, etc.), 35 percent of rural households surveyed had difficulties accessing at least one service and 23 percent accessing two services. What stands out in the results is the low proportion of households that use public transport and the difficulty accessing it, as well as the 22 percent of households that say they have difficulties accessing primary health care services, and the 19 percent that have difficulties accessing schools. The low density and high dispersion of the population makes maintaining services difficult, increasing problems to access them (CES, 2018).

Regarding rural Portugal, Almeida (2017) stresses how long-term unemployment, along with the lack of public services in the areas of health, education and justice, are essential problems resulting from depopulation. Another important issue in this country are the social support networks of elderly persons in rural areas. These seem to compensate for certain basic needs of the rural elderly, but not enough to increase their perceived quality of life (Paúl, 2005). Thus, for example, it is important that persons in these households can be accompanied when using the health care system.

Given all the trends we have described, many qualify the sociodemographic rural landscape as an inhospitable one and difficult to alter. But it is clear that the rural world fulfills various functions for the broader society: an economic function as a support in the provision of quality foods, a place for the installation of small and medium-sized firms, as well as for the provision of leisure and tourism services; ecological functions, constituting a buffer zone for the conservation of ecological balance by preserving natural resources; and a sociocultural function, maintaining and increasing its sociocultural role through the development of a local associative life, increasing relations with the urban population (PADMRV, 1997).

Intervention in rural areas to reduce depopulation is essential, such as providing equal access to information, improved mobility and attention to the population, facilitating the promotion of employment and sustainable development.

COMPARATIVE EVOLUTION OF SOCIODEMOGRAPHIC DYNAMICS IN RURAL BORDER AND INTERIOR REGIONS IN BOTH COUNTRIES

An inter-regional comparison of rural areas in both countries is justified because they are homogeneous regions. According to Boudeville (cited in Cabugueira, 2000), a region is homogeneous if its separate spatial units share common characteristics, such as natural resources and physical and geographic traits. In what follows, we provide a descriptive analysis for each of the rural areas examined:⁵

- Galicia and Minho: analyzing the main demographic indicators, we see that the proportion of children in the population in rural areas in Minho is much higher than in Galicia, 15.17 percent and 5.69 percent, respectively. The youth index follows a somewhat similar dynamic, 14.95 percent of the population in rural Minho being 15 to 29 years of age, in comparison to 11.43 percent in rural Galicia. The reverse occurs with the aging index; the percentage of the population 65 years of age and up is 38.4 percent in

Galicia and 16.58 percent in Minho. Therefore, we can see that despite their geographic proximity, rural areas in Galicia have a more aged population, while population indicators for Minho are more positive for its sustainability.

- Castille and Leon and Trás-os-Montes and Alto Douro: the childhood index reveals 8.31 children per one hundred inhabitants in the former, and 5.90 in the latter. The aging index is higher in the Spanish region (31.78) than the Portuguese region (9.1). This dynamic is explained by the high proportion of persons 29 to 65 years of age in the Portuguese region, which manifests in a dependency index figure of 22.97, quite low for a rural area. This is due to almost all the municipalities in this region experiencing population growth over the past decade.
- Extremadura and Beira Interior and Alentjo: these rural areas have very similar figures for the demographic indices; the Portuguese regions are slightly more aged than the Spanish, and thus, have a much higher dependency index of 77.46, in comparison to 48.97 for Extremadura.
- Andalusia and Algarve: these two regions have very similar figures for the demographic indices and for the dependency index in their rural areas.
- The Canary Islands and Balearic Islands in Spain and the Azores and Madeira in Portugal: of these four regions we can say that the most aged rural regions are in the Canary Islands, which has an aging index of 23.32 per 100 inhabitants, significantly higher than the others. The rural areas with the highest childhood index (17.03) are in Madeira, which also has the lowest aging index (15.75). Regarding youth and young adults, the Azores, with 20.55 percent of the population in this age group has the highest proportion, while the Balearic Islands has the lowest (13.53 percent). Lastly, and as would be expected, the Canary Islands has the highest measure of dependency (51.37 percent).

In short, population growth highlights the coastal/interior asymmetry, with an intensification of the loss of population in the rural interior. Thus, it seems that the places that are most distant from more dynamic and central municipalities are experiencing the incessant loss of residents, active population, voters, political significance and culture.

SUPPORT FOR THE MULTIFUNCTIONALITY OF THE LANDSCAPE AS A PATH FOR RURAL DEVELOPMENT: THE CASES OF SPAIN AND PORTUGAL

The objectives of rural development focus on conservation of the environment, improving quality of life, job creation, depopulation, aging, etc. The aim is

economic diversification and multifunctionality to counteract the loss of the economic competitiveness of traditional rural activities. Essentially, measures are aimed at fostering economic and social development by defending agricultural activities and cultural, social and other economic aspects of rural life (Entrena Durán, 2017).

The EU's Agenda 2000 adopted multifunctionality for the first time among the objectives of the CAP to increase the sustainability and competitiveness of European agriculture, without disregarding conservation of rural landscapes and resources; the aim being to contribute to improving rural living conditions, without ignoring the desires of the urban population for safe and quality foods, protection of the environment and the well-being of animals (Valadas, 2011).

Significant changes affected agriculture and forestry in the second half of the twentieth century, weakening many farms. One of the solutions to confront the low productivity of rural areas is to use these areas to satisfy urban demand for recreation (Pinto, 1985). Thus, the restructuring of Europe's rural economy has led to a change in land use and the establishment of new functions for the rural population, such as defending the value of the landscape and endogenous resources (Tirado-Ballesteros & Hernández-Hernández, 2018; Cánoves, Herrera & Blanco, 2005). As a result, rural space is less and less a productive space and more and more a produced space (Covas, 2010).

In the face of the demographic, economic and territorial imbalances existing in rural areas, diverse responses have been articulated that revolve around rural tourism. The aim is to emphasize the values and resources of each region along with the conservation of the environment to achieve greater sustainability. Although the impact of tourism in rural areas is questioned (Silva, 2010), it has gained a lot of support as we see in the existence of a diverse range of accommodation and activities (Cavaco, 2004).

CONCLUSIONS

The depopulation of rural areas has affected rural life in both Spain and Portugal, aggravated by the loss of basic services, which produces inequality in access for its inhabitants. This is a vicious circle: the declining number of inhabitants provokes the withdrawal of services and this provokes further population loss.

The absence of services, along with lower levels of human capital and fewer employment opportunities increase the difficulties of territorial integration and generate further economic decline in rural areas. As a result, it is necessary to address the deficits in services, adjusting them to the sociodemographic characteristics of each rural area through studying specific local needs. The access of the population and businesses to services, such as telecommunications, contributes to reducing the isolation of rural municipalities, improving the social

and economic cohesion and territorial articulation so sought after through rural development policies (CES, 2018).

To mitigate demographic imbalances and economic decline in rural areas we need to foster multifunctional territories, support the arrival of persons from outside, above all those that can invest in and create economic activities in order to promote development, without neglecting infrastructure and human resources. The result is that tourism is considered by governmental authorities as the means to diversify rural economies and as having the capacity to revitalize the most depressed regions by boosting local resources and for the multiplying effects it can have on the economy and employment (Cavaco, 2004; Ribeiro and Marques, 2002).

In short, the importance of the rural world is unquestionable, both in terms of social equilibrium and stability, and for the harmonious development of every country, counteracting the concentration of population in major cities and preserving the environment, landscape and rural heritage. To do this, it is essential to solve the problems present in these areas (Cunha, 2004).

NOTES

1. The so-called support generation are those persons born between 1958 and 1977 who constitute the most numerous cohorts. Support refers to their key position in the age structure and their numeric importance, both in earlier and later generations, along with their important role as caregivers of potentially inactive persons (the elderly and children), and their role in the economic activity and social dynamic in rural areas (Camarero, 2009).
2. Short-term fertility indicator: It is defined as the average number of children a woman belonging to a specific scope would have throughout her fertile age in the case the fertile intensity by age remains the same as the one observed in year t , in that same scope. This is calculated as the sum of the fertility rates, by age 4 (expressed as so much per one), extended to the range of fertile ages (15 to 49 years old).
3. Which refers to the fertility level necessary to assure that successive generations are substituted by others of equal size and, thus, population size is maintained. For the majority of populations in developed countries, it is considered that, to achieve this objective, the average number of children per woman should be 2.1 (Vinueza, Puga, & Instituto Nacional de Estadística, 2007).
4. Referring to territories with less than 10,000 inhabitants, as municipalities with less than 2,000 inhabitants will have a similar dynamic.
5. We aggregated data from the NUTS (Nomenclatura de las Unidades Territoriales Estadísticas) III (2002 version) from the INE for Portugal to have corresponding data *grosso modo* with the data from the traditional Portuguese sociocultural geographic regions (i.e., the provinces of Portugal). In the cases of Madeira and the Azores, there was no problem because they coincide with the respective NUTS I, II and III. In the case of continental Portugal, we added the NUTS III territorial units with the aim of referring to traditional regions (cf. Claudino, 2006), which are much larger. For example, “Minho-Lima” + “Cávado” + “Ave” = the

traditional geographic region of “Minho”, as there is no geographic consistency between NUTS III and traditional Portuguese regions. However, we are aware that this circumstance of incomplete correspondence between NUTS and traditional provinces can lead to undesirable distortions.

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