



The Role of Public Policies and Sustainable Tourism to Face the Demographic Challenge and Sustainable Production

Adriana Carolina Ávila Hernández^(✉)

Universidad de León, Doctoral School Academic Management Building (E.G.A), Vegazana Campus, 24007 León, Spain
aavilh00@estudiantes.unileon.es

Abstract. In the current context, the situation of the Spanish rural environment, its depopulation, as well as the alternatives that must be addressed from the public administration to address this problem, possesses within the agenda of the State to find a way to revitalize the countryside, in particular to light of the most recent world events that have occurred since 2020, which have evidenced that the food strength of the country goes hand in hand with the generation of strategies that to serve the increasingly depopulated rural environment. We intend to make a brief illustration of this phenomenon, making a global analysis of the situation to then focus on the province of León, analyzing the causes of the depopulation of its rural environment, the negative vegetative growth that has been experienced in recent decades and that still impacts the region today, the consequences that this situation has brought to the countryside, as well as the strategies, public actions and policies developed at the administrative level to address this a problem that is spreading more and more throughout the various Spanish Autonomous Communities. With this panorama in mind, we will review the trends related to sustainable tourism, the viability of implement a sustainable tourism strategy aimed at demographic revitalization for the Province of León, the responsible use of its resources natural resources, as well as the guarantee of their survival, within a component of public policy for the sustainable growth of environments.

Keywords: Sectoral economy · Social change and development · Evolution of societies · Legal system and protection

1 Introduction

The Spanish rural scenario has been strongly affected by various phenomena that have led to its depopulation, consolidating what is now commonly known as “empty Spain” [1]. Among them we have the abandonment of agricultural work, its reduction by modernization [2], the attraction of the city towards the inhabitants of the countryside derived from industrialization and the growth of new urban centers [3], the decrease of social, labor, educational and cultural opportunities in less productive environments [4], as well as the progressive devaluation of the rural world derived from the perception of the rural

way of life as a space of cultural backwardness and lacking value [5, 6]. At the same time, the poor communications network that the country has been dragging for some time [7], makes the rural space even more distant both physically and temporally from the current Spanish reality, which ultimately has led to an aging of the rural population [8], and loss of employment [9].

Since the 1960s, various strategies have been designed to guarantee the sustainability and survival of the rural world, as was the case of the vacation programs in farmhouses [7]. On the other hand, tourism has become an axis of economic development in the country, with the objective of generating social and inclusive development, a link between the economic, institutional and environmental sectors, to diversify economies, generating new demands for services for the community, reducing the exodus of the population, consolidating new employment opportunities for women and young people.

Thus, we propose to review the general context related to the genesis, phases and consequences of the depopulation of the Spanish rural environment, the programs associated with rural activity, the state of public actions in terms of attention to the demographic challenge. Subsequently, we will enter into the study of public policies and actions related to the promotion of rural development and the regulatory framework that supports the sustainable development of the rural environment, together with the characteristics of sustainable tourism.

Finally, we propose to present the strategy of sustainable tourism as an essential public action for demographic revitalization, a strategic axis for rural territorial development, especially in the most economically and socially depressed areas, diversifying the industry, within a productive cycle and responsible consumption that allows facing the demographic challenges, taking advantage of the resources destined to consolidate employment opportunities and stable work, providing homogeneously distributed socioeconomic benefits.

2 The Abandonment of Rural Areas

The first enlightened experiences of colonization in the interior date back to the nineteenth century, with the approval of agricultural colonies, and later with the concept that emerged in 1866 of “coto redondo acasarado” as the basis for an individualist colonization system [3]. Later we had the presence of agrarian liberalism and the search for agrarian reform. Then, in 1907, we had the approval of the colonization and repopulation of the interior (distribution of land among poor farmers) of little practical significance.

From 1905 onwards, the Canalejas (1911) and Alba (1916) projects followed, which was succeeded by the Dictatorship of Primo Rivera and the actions of the Second Republic: focused on land distribution. These were followed in time by the 1931 Constitution, the 1932 Agrarian Reform Law, and Royal Decree 118 of 1973, to name but a few.

As has been analyzed in recent years, the low effectiveness of these actions is well known, as they have not addressed at all the crisis generated by the depopulation of the Spanish countryside in areas of large abandoned agricultural areas, a paradoxical situation in comparison with the European scenario, in which the areas of greatest poverty are located in urban centers, finding that in today’s globalized economy local territories are discovered as the main sources for promoting [3].

From the mid-twentieth century onwards, the situation has not changed much, with depopulation advancing because of a prolonged historical process in which migratory movements can be framed as a result of two parallel processes [2]. On the one hand, we have the development of industrialization models centered basically in the urban and capital area with little implementation in medium-sized cities or rural areas, and on the other, the imbalances derived from the unjustified difference in the provision of essential public services, which were reduced in accordance with the decrease in the point of equilibrium necessary to make their maintenance profitable.

For this reason, life in the Spanish countryside has gradually become an impossible and uprooted option that is economically uncertain and highly discriminatory because, among other things, local administrations are not equipped to offer the conditions that motivate citizens to establish permanent residence in the rural environment [2]. The migration of the rural population has been constant towards urban environments, as they aspire to a better quality of education, better employment, health, housing, in short, to substantially improve living conditions. Among the multiple causes that have led to depopulation in rural environments we have:

- Impossibility of maintaining an active and competitive primary sector in the food demand, together with the inadequacy of soils, the lack of capital and the bad structure of the properties of the agricultural exploitations.
- Inadequate supply of cultural, recreational, and social services.
- The industrialization of the agricultural sector, which in some areas drives urban migration due to the decrease in job opportunities.
- The reduction of the labor market.
- The aging of the population.
- Loss of labor force.
- Reduction in the number of inhabitants of municipalities with the consequent suppression in the provision of public services.
- Negative vegetative growth.

This is why, although in principle Spain has experienced significant demographic growth, since between 2001 and 2019, the country went from 41.1 to 47 million inhabitants, increasing by almost 6 million more people, which represents a growth of close to 15%; the truth is that in the twenty-first century the process of depopulation has intensified, and this process of loss has accelerated in the last decade. This is especially the case in four autonomous communities that have lost population during the twenty-first century (Extremadura, Galicia, Castilla y León and Asturias). Especially at the municipal level, since of the 8131 municipalities in Spain, 5102 have lost population since 2001. Similarly, in the last decade, 6232 municipalities have lost population. This phenomenon, as has been mentioned, is eminently rural, with 926 municipalities with a density of less than 12.5 inhabitants/km², the threshold considered by the EU to be at demographic risk, which has consequently translated into negative vegetative balances since the 1980s [10].

In the case of Castilla y León, the community has an area of 94,225 km², almost undoubtedly the largest region in Europe, reaching 19% of the national territory but with a population of less than 2,500,000 inhabitants, with a great dispersion of the population

essentially in the rural world with 2116 municipalities with less than 2000 inhabitants, 1981 with less than 1000 inhabitants and 1724 with less than 500 inhabitants, and on the other hand only 15 cities in the community have more than 20,000 inhabitants [4].

3 Status of Public Actions to Address the Demographic Challenge

Thus, the objective of the demographic challenge must be equal rights and opportunities for people wherever they live, which is also a symbol of social cohesion and due legal protection in basic guarantees that the State must provide to all citizens. It is not possible to reverse economic trends if it is not initially clear how the rural territory is to be sustained and developed. With such a perspective, there is a need for change in the public policy framework of the economic and territorial development models in both urban and rural areas [2], insofar as it is intended to preach a true social cohesion that is basically impacting the democratic models on which society is based.

The union between law and these problems is reflected in the use of administrative instruments to motivate and activate the actions of the administration in search of the necessary social cohesion in these territories, as well as the guarantee of constitutional rights, thus ensuring the effective realization of the social rule of law model such as:

- Real equality (Articles 14 and 9.2. C.E.)
- Dignity of the population of rural areas (article 10 C.E.)
- General interest (article 103.1 C.E.)
- Economic progress (articles 40.1, 130.1, 131.1 C.E.).

The demographic evolution of the last decade may affect the sustainability of the welfare state and jeopardize social cohesion, territorial structuring and the model of coexistence [3]. For this reason, the Ministry of Ecological Transition and Demographic Challenge has pointed out that the demographic challenge is a fundamental dimension of social and territorial cohesion in our country and one of the priority axes in the agenda of pending reforms.

In the short term there are no clear, rapid and uniform solutions to combat it, so it is essential to establish plans and programs that articulate actions at all levels of territorial power, combating the complex web of economic, social, environmental and cultural causes described above. These solutions must be based not only on rural migration [11], but also on the generation of capital, large investments, public sector decisions, personal desires for liberation and process, as well as the generation of productive and sustainable environments.

It is necessary to bear in mind that the problem of depopulation is, above all, a legal problem because it is largely based on inadequate normative regulation and the formulation of strategies and public policies that govern not only the relationships between people but also between people and public authorities and between citizens and their environment. It is becoming increasingly evident that the administration, with its excessive legal regulations, contributes to further aggravating the problems of the rural world, making its revitalization more and more difficult, partly because the formulation of these regulations is never based on the reality of the territories they are intended to regulate.

4 Public Policy for Rural Development and Sustainable Tourism Strategy

Policies to address demographic challenges do not refer to the analysis of social factors in the explanation of variations in the so-called natural movement of the population (birth rate, mortality, municipality), but precisely the opposite: the attempt to modify the demographic structure of a population to improve its situation, development, or processes of inequality [3].

Despite the antiquity of the phenomenon, it is only in recent times that attention has been paid to it through the following instruments:

- 2015 Senate Report on the adoption of measures in relation to rural depopulation in Spain [12].
- VI Conference of Presidents of January 2017, in which the need to address demographic changes or challenges is determined [13].
- Creation of the government commissioner to address the demographic challenge: Royal Decree 40/2017 of January 27 [14].
- Report 1 of 2018 of the Economic and Social Council on the rural environment and its social and territorial structuring [15].
- General Guidelines of the National Strategy for the Demographic Challenge [16].
- Creation of the Ministry for Ecological Transition and the Demographic Challenge: Royal Decree 139/2020 of January 28 [17].
- Creation of the General Secretariat for the Demographic Challenge by Royal Decree 500/2020 of April 28 [18].

In turn, with the General Guidelines of the National Strategy for the Demographic Challenge [16], 7 cross-cutting objectives have been established, which are:

- Guarantee full territorial connectivity, with adequate co-opening of broadband internet and mobile telephony throughout the territory, in accordance with the European Digital Agenda 2020.
- Ensure an appropriate provision of basic services to the entire population in conditions of equity, adapted to the characteristics of each territory.
- Incorporate the impact and demographic perspective in the preparation of laws, plans and investment programs, favoring territorial redistricting in favor of greater social cohesion.—Advance in regulatory and administrative simplification, for small municipalities, in order to facilitate the management of municipalities.
- Eliminate stereotypes and enhance the image and reputation of the territories most affected by demographic risks.
- Improve mechanisms for greater public–private collaboration, enhancing the incorporation of demographic factors in the social responsibility of the private sector, to turn all territories, without exclusions, into scenarios of opportunities.
- Align the lines of action and purposes of the Strategy with the fulfillment of the Sustainable Development Goals and the 2030 Agenda.

Among the measures promoted is the promotion of tourism, and within this, mention should be made of Law 45/2007 of December 13 for the Sustainable Development of the Rural Environment (LDSMR), which is an ambitious instrument that has sought to reverse the situation of depopulation. Its purpose, as stated in its first article, is to regulate and establish measures aimed at promoting sustainable rural development as a suitable mechanism for counteracting the growing territorial differences and guaranteeing equality among Spanish citizens as a whole.

According to the second article of this law, the aim is to support and progressively expand the economic base of the rural environment, maintain and improve the demographic situation of rural areas by increasing the well-being and quality of life of the citizens through the conservation and recovery of the heritage and natural and cultural resources of these areas. In addition, Article 22 establishes specific and particular objectives that must be included in the policies adopted and developed by the different administrations.

The realization that the Spanish rural environment continues to show a development differential with respect to the urban environment, especially marked in certain rural areas, revealed the shortcomings of this essentially agrarian model and the need for a change in the focus of public policies, which, in order to attend to frequently marginalized territories and populations, should move from an agrarian and sectoral approach to a fundamentally territorial and integral approach.

Territorial cohesion, and with it environmental sustainability and human habitability, must then be understood as an opportunity within a new country model aligned with the international sustainable development agendas—Agenda 2030 of the Sustainable Development Goals, the Paris Agreement on climate change and the New Urban Agenda—that place people at the center of their actions, since the main challenge must be to combat inequality in access to services.

In this set, 130 measures were proposed in response to the demographic challenges facing Spanish communities, with sustainable tourism being one of the axes of development, seen as an economic and social engine and a lever for the sustainable development of the territory, which can contribute to halting the depopulation of the rural environment and its consequent deterioration, to the protection and promotion of heritage and the natural environment and to the improvement of the quality of life of people, promoting among others 7 measures for its promotion [19]:

- Tourism Sustainability Program in Destinations
- Sustainable Tourism Product Development Plan
- Plan for the Promotion of the Circular Economy in tourism
- Maintenance and sustainable rehabilitation of historic heritage properties for tourist use
- For a healthy tourism: cultural and natural heritage and sports activities
- Plan for the Digital Transformation of Tourism Destinations
- Plan for the Digital Transformation of Companies in the tourism value chain through Artificial Intelligence and other enabling technologies.

Despite the above, the instrument, although ambitious, has not had the corresponding investment from the administration to carry out its initiatives that would allow to reverse

the situation of depopulation of rural areas in a decisive and forceful way. This has meant that, for example, new activities planned to promote the sector, such as rural tourism or the recovery of historical and cultural heritage, have been lost. Additionally, the lack of coordination and planning at the time of designing the actions to develop to revitalize the rural environment by the public administrations are in frank retreat, which, added to the gradual forgetfulness of the organisms in charge of the citizen participation, have made unfeasible, in spite of the multiplicity of instruments, strategies, the construction of a true model of sustainable territorial development.

Finally, we consider that all these actions should be urgently reviewed in order to adapt them to the concrete and specific needs of small and medium-sized municipalities. Indeed, as a national strategy, the obvious rule of territorial, cultural and population diversity of the Spanish territory. For this reason, although as an incipient framework it may be indicative, in practice, like so many other regulations, it does not meet the needs of rural areas. It is imperative to make the requirements more flexible in order to implement the various lines of action, to promote economic activities and to favor regulations that take into account the various municipal realities, along with a more flexible regime for achieving the objectives set forth therein.

References

1. Molino, S. del.: *La España vacía: viaje por un país que nunca fue* (4a ed., 14a reimp.). Turner (2019)
2. Domínguez, J., Marcos, F., Francesc, B.: *Comunidades discriminadas y territorios rurales abandonados. Políticas públicas y derecho administrativo frente a la despoblación*. (1a ed.). Aranzadi (2021)
3. Iglesias, S. et al.: *Instrumentos jurídicos para la lucha contra la despoblación rural*. Aranzadi (2021)
4. Quintana, T., Rodríguez, S., Casares, A., Agra Viforcós, B.: *Proyección transversal de la sostenibilidad en Castilla y León, varias perspectivas*. Tirant lo Blanch (2019)
5. Sánchez, A., Sánchez, F.: *Impacto del turismo rural sobre el empleo en España: una aproximación a escala provincial*. *Cuadernos de Desarrollo Rural* **15**(82), 1–19 (2018). <https://doi.org/10.11144/Javeriana.cdr15-82.itre>
6. Solano, M., Riquelme, P. y Carreño, F.: *Destinos Turísticos Emergentes y Empoderamiento del Mundo Rural: Las Divergencias y Convergencias en las Políticas Turísticas*. *Int. J. Scient. Managm. Tourism* **2**(2), 467—487 (2016)
7. Cánoves, G.: *Políticas públicas, turismo rural y sostenibilidad: Difícil equilibrio*. *Boletín de La Asociación de Geógrafos Españoles*. **41**, 199–217 (2006)
8. Domínguez, J.: *La Despoblación en Castilla y León: Políticas públicas innovadoras que garanticen el futuro de la Juventud en el medio rural*. *Cuadernos de Investigación en Juventud*. **6**(28), 21–36 (2019). <https://doi.org/10.22400/cij.6.e028>
9. Rodríguez, S., Álvarez, H., y Quintana, T.: *La economía social como palanca para la sostenibilidad en los territorios rurales*. Tirant lo Blanch (2021)
10. <https://www.lamoncloa.gob.es/presidente/actividades/Documents/2020/280220-despoblacion-en-cifras.pdf>
11. Collantes, F., Pinilla, V., Sáez, L.A., Silvestre, J.: *Reducing depopulation in rural Spain: the impact of immigration*. *Popul. Space Place* **20**(7), 606–621 (2014). <https://doi.org/10.1002/psp.1797>
12. http://sspa-network.eu/wp-content/uploads/BOCG_D_10_505_3392.pdf

13. <https://www.lamoncloa.gob.es/espana/historico/eh17/adminterr/Paginas/viconfpres.aspx>
14. <https://www.boe.es/eli/es/rd/2017/01/27/40/con>
15. Informes del Consejo Económico y Social pp. 1–168. (2018). ISSN 1136-8101, Nº 1, 2018, ISBN 978-84-8188-374-9
16. Ministerio de Política Territorial y Función Pública.: Directrices generales de la Estrategia Nacional frente al Reto Demográfico (2019). http://www.mptfp.es/dam/es/portal/reto_demografico/Estrategia_Nacional/directrices_generales_estrategia.pdf
17. <https://www.boe.es/eli/es/rd/2020/01/28/139/con>
18. <https://www.boe.es/eli/es/rd/2020/04/28/500>
19. https://www.miteco.gob.es/images/va/plan_recuperacion_130_medidas_tcm39-528327.pdf