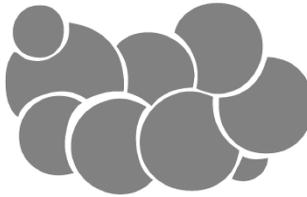


***Extended abstract***

*Analysis of the National Strategy  
Against Depopulation in the  
Demographic Challenge (Spain)*



***Luis Antonio Sáez Pérez***  
***Universidad de Zaragoza, Spain***

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*Highlights:*

1. The national strategy is not based on empirical and analytical evidence, nor does it address the relevant literature.
2. It underlies an impossible incrementalist perspective, and omits the will on where to live as a foundation.
3. It tackles complex phenomena with top-down functional approaches without contextualizing, with alluvial writing and serious omissions.

*Abstract:* The Spanish government's strategy against depopulation has a range of errors in its approach. It is eminently quantitative, sectorial, top-down and functional, regardless of the will of the people as to where and how to live, which should be the key. Population increase underlies as a main hidden target, which is impossible to obtain. The measures are presented in a disorganized way, cut and paste from ministries without reasoning how they would integrate a coherent and interdepartmental strategy, with added value. Moreover, relevant issues such as housing, mobility, and immigration and new residents, are omitted. It also fails to take advantage of the know-how of other governments and development agencies, and dispenses with the latest research, which would inspire a different style and evidence-based content. All this will hinder its effectiveness. Thereby, even if a well-designed strategy does not confirm that it will achieve its goals, not fixing the starting errors makes it highly unlikely.

*Keywords:* Depopulation, policies, rural development, Spain.

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## *Extended abstract*

Depopulation is an issue that in Spain has been slow to enter the national agenda, but once it has done so, as cleavage of regional financing, it has generated a profusion of regulations that spills over into practically all areas of government. So, the central government has presented from 2019, in just two years, two strategies in three extensive documents that make up the so-called *Reto Demográfico* (*Demographic Challenge*), with autonomous institutional dynamics and substantial differences in their approaches. They are the *Plan de Recuperación: 130 medidas contra el Reto Demográfico* (*Recovery Plan: 130 measures against the Demographic Challenge*), in the spring of 2021, and the *Directrices Generales de la Estrategia Nacional contra el Reto Demográfico* (*General Guidelines of the National Strategy against the Demographic Challenge*), with an initial document in March 2019 and a draft in November 2020. They are a set of very significant policies, in constant debate over their definition and application, which should be evaluated taking advantage of scientific knowledge and comparative experience, as this article poses.

In this study, two solid theoretical frameworks from economics are employed, which are recognized as a basic procedure for evaluating policies, complementary to each other. On the one hand, using arguments from Political Economy, it introduces an innovative vision of the efficiency of the institutions according to a subjective criterion that would take, in our case, as its more inspiring principle, the freedom of people to choose where to reside. In this way, the government should not so much pursue a certain number of inhabitants in a village, but make easy that wishes and choices match about how, with whom, and where to live. From Political Economy, other concepts are also provided to estimate the consistency of strategies through the ends-means scheme, assessing their intrinsic coherence and according to the contexts in which they are applied, taking into account the underlying value judgments inherent to all policies, which in this case, as usual, being decisive, they are not made explicit.

A fundamental starting point in this work is the consideration of depopulation as something more than a simple statistical phenomenon, solvable as if it were the unknown variable of a function, a perspective that underlies the government's strategy. Instead, the article considers that the demographic trends are the consequence of multiple interdependent causes related to well-being, the vibrancy of

the communities in which they live, and the subjectivity with which life is valued in them. Thus, a second analytical line is introduced that gives a greater substantive content to the previous one, taking as references the debates on development understood as a process of enhancing people's capabilities by expanding their real freedoms. These discussions hold a deep inter and transdisciplinary theoretical work and are taking into account by the United Nations, the European Union and the OECD to improve diagnostics and the subsequent implementation of more rigorous policies.

According to all that, based on the combination of these theories, and on the most relevant literature on shrinking rural areas and on the comparative analysis of other strategies already carried out, the targets, policies and inspiring principles of the *Estrategia Nacional frente al Reto Demográfico (National Strategy against the Demographic Challenge)* are studied.

As a whole, it can be seen that the strategy incurs a very common bias, since it is usually rewarded by public opinion, consisting in believing that a greater number of ends and policies make it more efficient and rigorous. This leads to some lengthy sections, usually merely declarative, scattered throughout any government area that hinted at some hypothetical impact on a behaviour favourable to residing in a small town, that is, all of them, regardless of their logic, sense, and viability. This *horror vacui* is very counterproductive by making agile and effective management difficult, in addition to many of the measures being very unfocused, without truly influencing depopulation, more influenced by cultural and sociological issues, basically how to value rural life, than by economic and budgetary, in which legislators are worried, although they all count.

The main objectives are stated in terms of equity, "as equal opportunities and the free exercise of rights" and as "territorial cohesion". The former would focus on the well-being of people with a social sense, while cohesion usually has a more macro and geographical perspective, oriented towards goals of a more functional nature, such as competitiveness and levels of income and consumption.

The matter with them is that, despite the length of the three documents of the national strategy, at no time is it explained what is meant by equality and cohesion, goals influenced by historical, political, and territorial contexts. It is true that the policies, being more specific, could clarify them, if there was some internal coherence in their wording. But given the triviality with which they are described, they cannot be used either, and all that reduces the credibility of the plan. On the other hand, there is a great lack of coordination between the different documents of the *Reto Demográfico*, unbalanced in structure and content when they are related to each

other since in some the objectives are explained in detail, in another the institutional architecture and in another part the more measures imminent, these ones guided more than anything by the urgency with which to allocate funds from Europe on the occasion of COVID-19 than by previous careful analysis.

The judgments and values associated with the strategy, which could be an important reference and interpellate more committed behaviours, are not voiced and remain implicit in the indicators that will value their impact. These are a detailed battery of equations that measure, above all, variations in population, density, labour force, demographic structure, etc., and they come to point out that more is always better. Therefore, more than equity and cohesion, with respect to which there is no relatable relationship, a quantitative and incremental goal appears tacit but very powerful as the ultimate goal that gives meaning to everything.

Therefore, there is not a strong deliberation on the low probability of reversing such robust demographic decreasing trends, when the population projections indicate slight growth in the whole of Spain, but negative in any case at the regions most affected by depopulation. Nor is it argued about the possible advantages of residing in a low-density territory. And when goals are impossible they generate frustration and inspire bad decisions.

So the objectives are not clear within a functional and organic approach to the territories, very conventional but not very relevant. No attention is paid to informal associations and institutions, which activate rural social capital, nor to aspirations unrelated to income and consumption. More than people who have diverse, quantitative and qualitative motivations, who require tangible and intangible factors, being and having, it would seem that the authors have in mind a *homo economicus* whose happiness only culminates by consuming more and more.

The measures lack strategic meaning, without analytical and institutional frameworks that articulate them, stated in a mere declarative way, omitting some of the most relevant challenges for sparsely rural areas such as housing, the immigrant population, and rural mobility in functional supra-municipal areas. Although there are developments in governance to cooperate public horizontally and vertically, even with civil society, a very important contribution, on the other hand, it does not value the know-how of programs down-top that have energized peripheral rural areas such as LEADER, and insists on approaches from above sectoral. Very expensive investments are raised in hard factors, the cult of infrastructures continues, as always those of transport and now telematics, instead of the intangibles that have to do with talent,

tolerance, and creativity, more relevant in a creative and post-material capitalism of a more humane and caring sustainable society.

Consequently, the assessment of the *Estrategia Nacional contra el Reto Demográfico* is unfavourable, due to its imperfect diagnosis, unfocused design, and weak way of carrying it out. It dispenses with research on the subject and does not take into account the experiences of other plans. Internally, there is little coherence between its measures and objectives. The number of policies is enormous, on many occasions proposing actions already underway, others highly dependent on cooperation with sub-central levels of government, and quite a few at a very incipient level. And it does not propose transversal actions adapted to the idiosyncrasy of the territories. But what most limits its effectiveness is the impossibility of achieving the effectively intended goals, which clearly state the indicators with which it will be valued. All of them associate their performance with the growth of the population, something impossible even in the case of those vibrant places, because in most of the depopulated rural areas, due to the path dependence of their demographic structure and the general population trends of aging and low birth rates, it is not possible.