

Extended abstract

*Towards Greater Interventionism and
Directionality in Rural Development
Policies: The Basque Example (Spain)*



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Highlights:

1. Rural communities disestablishment despite maintaining population.
2. Exhaustion of the current framework for rural development.
3. Bet on more directional and less participatory proposals.
4. They are not shared or assumed decisions, they are not expected to be implemented.

Abstract: Many rural communities are facing a new context marked by depopulation, being close to abandonment. Others, for different reasons, are also facing a process of disestablishment. The Basque rural areas are at the expense of an urban environment that gives preferently residential function. The approval of the new rural development law is part of the need to apply an intervention model that takes into account the current situation. The research pursues the objective of assessing the convenience of the chosen model. The main novelty lies in the public-private governance model that it proposes. Its responsibility falls to a public entity, HAZI. The new law rewards agility, intervention, and usefulness over other criteria such as participation, cogovernance or directionality starting from the base. Local agents and investigators consider that the rural development law of the Basque Country represents a setback with respect to the previous legal framework, by revealing the distrust of rural agents who are imposed the function of promoting policies established from top to bottom.

Keywords: Rural development, cogovernance, agrarian policy, Basque Country.

Extended Abstract

1. Justification, objectives and methodology

After several decades of certain stability, the last years of the new millennium point to a new context in many rural areas of Spain. This scenario is marked by the loss of population, accelerating a process of depopulation and leaving many of these areas on the verge of destructuring and abandonment.

The Basque Country is part of this situation, but only relatively. The improvement of infrastructures has reduced the distance to the urban area, the rural municipalities have grown in population, the unemployment figures are reduced and their population work in the proximity. However, in this approach, rural communities have become unstructured.

The origin of the new rural development law of the Basque Country (RDL), approved in May 2022, must be framed in the concern generated by the destructuring of their rural community. The materialization of the proposal is based on the need to reinforce coordination between the different departments that can intervene in rural development. It aspires to be agile and practical, and it proposes, by means of objectives, to direct a policy in which all the structures with the capacity to act are aligned in its attainment, from the local to the regional ones.

The main objective of this research is to evaluate the convenience of the need for a new governance model and its possible applicability to other territories, especially to those rural areas subjected to strong urban pressure.

The gestation of a new pattern does not arise spontaneously. It is preceded by studies, presentations, contributions, appearances, allegations... in which different agents contribute to their vision of how rural development should be. It is a moment rich in contributions that, nevertheless, are rarely published.

Jointly, the contrast with the agents of rural development, especially from the County Rural Development Associations (RDA), is the methodology prioritized to value unpublished contributions. The comparison arises from the informal and unstructured interview, from a relationship of trust and knowledge acquired over the years and from the habit of sharing information and asking for opinions.

2. Results and discussion of the results

Analysing the contributions of the RDL, in comparison with the previous one, we observe that it basically repeats its structure

- The new law updates concepts but does not incorporate new objectives, which are repeated year after year and program after program.
- The proposed zoning does not provide new aspects either. They were already included in the classification of population entities that has regulated the distribution of aid for the promotion of rural areas.
- The new law continues to be based on the need to reinforce coordination between the different Basque Government departments that can intervene in rural development.

The main novelty lies in the governance model RDL proposes. It downplays the importance of the county as a preferential sphere of action and the role to be played by the RDAs. Their role is ascribed to voluntary agreements to apply lines of action decided by the Basque Administration. In addition, the role of the local entities that were part of its structure is in question, limiting the influence of local entities in the RDAs. The management of rural policy falls to HAZI, an entity dependent on the Basque Government. That decision shows that Basque Government gives more priority to executing guidelines than to empowering the local population.

The new RDL does not get the approval of rural agents because it considers the local administration as secondary and dependent. Neither for the type of response it provides, because they consider that the rural environment needs an integral and global response, a concerted and not subordinated effort between public institutions and different agents. Nor for the model of governance that it proposes, which should be shared because, involving different institutions, participation and effective collaboration between different agents is necessary.

The proposals for improvement the law are not excessively numerous and concentrate on requesting a more participatory governance process integrated by local agents and supported by the county area as a unit of action.

All rural agents and institutions share the need to undertake actions from a rural vision. They also share the principles that some of them consider that the new pattern must have. Arguments such as shared governance, participation, protagonism and involvement of local agents, institutional transversality and bottom-up

directionality are cited by all as necessary principles. The application of the principles though is understood differently by some and by others

The recognition of RDA as an entity subordinate to the guidelines of regional sectoral policy is a decision that does not follow the recommendations of the experts. They are clearly committed to promoting a bottom-up approach, encouraging a critical and participatory culture, with a view rooted in the territory and relying on the existing institutional framework, especially in local development agencies.

Despite this, many of the approaches of the Basque RDL may be appropriate two decades later, at a time that seems key for the future of the Spanish rural territories, especially the proposed inter-administrative collaboration. But the fact that the operability of the model drives greater directionality, from top to bottom, and of a greater interventionism of non-local entities, generates many doubts about its capacity to guarantee the progress of rural communities.

3. Conclusions and future directions

The research provides different conclusions. The first of these is that the destructuring of agrarian spaces does not occur exclusively in depopulated Spain. Other regions, close to the city, such as the rural area of Basque Country, are at the expense of an urban environment that provides these territories with an exclusively residential function. The result is a weakened social community.

The second conclusion is related to the appropriateness of the model chosen by the Basque Government to deal with the aforementioned problem. The new law rewards agility, intervention and utility over other criteria such as participation, co-governance or directionality from the bottom up. It does not follow the recommendations of experts who are clearly committed to promoting a bottom-up approach and a critical and participatory culture based on the territory, nor does it coincide with the calls from Europe to promote participatory policies, based on co-governance.

But it is a recently approved law, which has to develop much of its contents, and which may include proposals that contribute to increase local participation. The RDL of the Basque Country should improve this fact, at least in the following areas:

Regarding the public-private governance model, the Law should involve the RDAs in the preparation, management and dynamization of the County Rural Development programs.

In relation to the zoning proposal, the Law must unify criteria for all rural areas and the county plans must be the ones that prioritize the objectives that must prevail in each county.

In relation to the coordination of rural development policy, a step must be taken to promote coordination between the different counties as a way of facing challenges jointly.

In terms of financing instruments, the option of moving from one to three Leader groups in the next period, one for each territory, seems clearly advisable because it would help to focus on targeted projects, more in line with the needs of each territory.

The research that analyses rural development in Spain starts from a critique of the rural development model. It does not propose a break with it, but rather an improvement and adaptation to the current situation. They consider that promoting economic diversification through public-private collaboration and bottom-up governance is a basic principle in rural development.