Towards Smart Development in Unpopulated Rural Regions in Europe: Analysis of Smart Rural Calls 21 and 27

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**Highlights:**

1. Smart solutions are key in rural development.
2. The energy and digital transition are key to the development of European rural areas.
3. European Next Generation funds promote the transformation of rural territories into Smart Villages.
4. Rural depopulation could be reversed with an intelligent and sustainable territorial development model.
5. EU’s Smart Rural initiatives pave way for transforming villages into Smart Villages.

**Abstract:** In the quest for innovative and "smart" rural development in Europe, driven by goals like digital, green, and social transition, pilot calls Smart Rural 21 and 27 have been launched. These recently implemented initiatives are under European evaluation, with a specific focus on Spain. The research employs the logical framework methodology, drawing from official websites of both calls. A problem tree analysis is conducted to understand the causes and consequences of rural depopulation in Europe, forming the basis for a tree of intelligent and sustainable solutions proposed in Smart Rural 21 and 27 pilot territories. The initial hypothesis aims to validate European objectives in reducing economic, social, and environmental impact in depopulated rural areas. Technological and organizational innovation, linked to sustainability, guides the path towards intelligent and sustainable territorial development in European rural spaces. The success of these calls will determine the new 'smart' approach to rural development in Europe. The article aims to disseminate and analyse these calls, along with Spain’s involvement.

**Keywords:** Rural development, Smart Towns, NextGenerationEU Funds, digital transition, green transition, rural depopulation.
Extended Abstract

1. Introduction and Justification

The proliferation of Smart projects in recent years reflects a growing commitment to fostering intelligent and sustainable development in rural areas as a means to counteract depopulation. These initiatives primarily seek to align with Europe’s transitions towards digital, green, social, and territorial advancements. With the launch of several calls for proposals, including the highly successful Smart Rural 21, followed by the subsequent Smart Rural 27, the momentum towards Smart Village strategies has gained significant traction. Notably, Spain showcased a remarkable level of participation in the initial phase, with Ansó emerging as a standout project. In the second call, Ansó’s re-inclusion alongside other regions exemplifies the roadmap towards realizing the Smart Village vision. The central question revolves around the coherence of the proposed rural development strategies with Europe’s overarching transitions and their capacity to effectively address existing challenges. Initially, we posit that these strategies are in alignment with Europe’s objectives, and we anticipate their potential to ameliorate economic, social, and environmental impacts in the coming years.

2. Objectives, Methodology, Sources, and Study Areas

The principal aim of this study is to elucidate the strategies presented in the Smart Rural 21 and Smart Rural 27 calls across Europe, with a specific lens on Spain. Supplementary objectives involve delving into the role of European funds in shaping Smart Village strategies. The methodology will entail a multifaceted approach, commencing with an exhaustive literature review to comprehend the strategies outlined in the Smart Rural 21 and Smart Rural 27 calls, with a particular focus on Spain. Visual aids like graphs, tables, problem trees, and proposed solutions will supplement the comprehension of this data. While the study’s scope encompasses diverse European territories, the emphasis remains on Spanish municipalities. Ansó’s case will be spotlighted, given its prominence in Smart Rural 21 and re-inclusion in Smart Rural 27. Other Spanish candidates making a return appearance, as well as
several regions from the Basque Country, Catalonia, and Aragon participating in Smart Rural 27, will also receive consideration.

3. Results

The analysis of varying territories, both within Spain and on a broader European scale, exposes a notable convergence of proposed strategies for rural development. Projects linked to Smart Rural Areas throughout Europe, coupled with case studies within Spain, underscore a distinct emphasis on critical issues such as economic growth, mobility enhancement, connectivity, and improved governance. These initiatives exemplify a steadfast commitment to bolstering employment opportunities, bridging the rural-urban divide through enhanced physical and digital infrastructure, and fostering sustainable transportation methods. These concerted efforts exhibit substantial potential in fostering more interconnected, efficient, and sustainable rural communities.

4. Discussion

The exploration of Smart Rural Areas 21 and 27 calls underscores the alignment of diverse rural development strategies with Europe’s objectives, particularly in the context of sustainable development. The European Union has fervently supported these initiatives through the allocation of funds via the European Commission and Parliament, with a marked focus on “Next Generation” funds to counter depopulation challenges. This financial backing also underscores a commitment to policies that promote the green and digital transition, exemplified by Spain’s “Spain Can” program launched in 2020. While considerable strides have been made through these Smart Village endeavours, the research identifies certain limitations, particularly concerning the Smart Rural 27 call. Uncertainties persist regarding whether already participating territories will exclusively partake or whether additional municipalities and regions can implement requisite smart strategies. Moreover, given the recent conclusion of the first call, the optimal path forward remains a topic of discussion. Nevertheless, the increasing prevalence of such initiatives and the substantial allocation of European funds underscore the aspiration to realize a model of rural development prioritizing comprehensive transitions towards sustainable and thriving territories.
5. Conclusions

In summation, an examination of Smart Rural 21 and 27 calls underscores a robust commitment from diverse European territories, particularly Spain, in catalysing intelligent and sustainable rural development via innovation and technology. These initiatives present a formidable response to the critical challenge of depopulation, as they introduce novel measures and solutions. By harnessing technology and digital infrastructure, rural areas can mitigate the impact of depopulation, stimulate employment, bolster resource accessibility, and narrow the digital divide. Furthermore, these initiatives align seamlessly with the transitions mandated by the European Union to achieve sustainable development, centred on principles of globality, integration, sustainability, and social and territorial equity. While certain limitations persist and uncertainties surround the scope of these initiatives, the escalating proliferation of such projects and the substantial allocation of European funds suggest that this model of rural development is poised for enduring impact. The implementation of smart strategies in rural areas holds the promise of generating fresh opportunities, reversing depopulation trends, and cultivating more resilient and prosperous communities.

6. Next Steps

The Smart Village development model, championed by Europe to combat depopulation, is poised to shape strategies focused on overarching transitions, chiefly the digital and green transitions. These transitions offer a pathway towards innovative and sustainable development facilitated by cutting-edge technologies. Future research avenues should delve into whether Smart Villages effectively counter rural depopulation. This could entail analysing the tangible impacts observed within municipalities where such practices are endorsed and supported by various agencies. Furthermore, the influence of European aid and policies demands attention, particularly the potential ramifications of the Next Generation EU Funds and the new Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) implementation this year. These elements stand as pivotal considerations, warranting thorough examination to gauge their effects on proposed development models and strategies within rural areas.