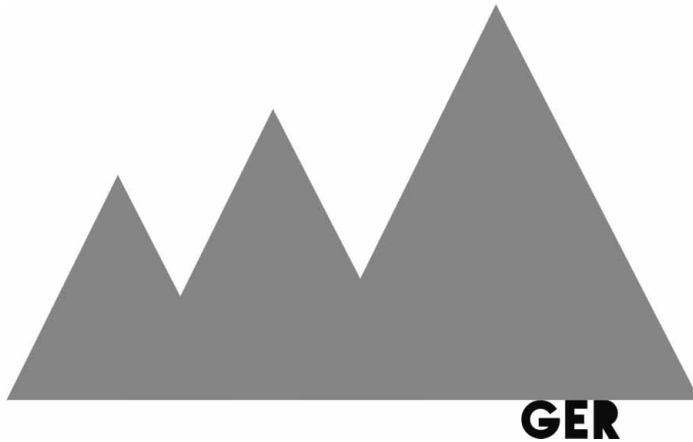


Extended abstract

*(Well)Coming Territories: Where Social Wellbeing
and Migrant Reception Initiatives Meet
in Southern Europe*



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Highlights:

1. The social and collective dimension of migrant well-being has been overlooked in rural studies.
2. Understanding territories as multidimensional entities helps to create healthier and less paternalistic discussions about migration.
3. The well-being of rural communities can be supported/enhanced by welcoming international newcomers.
4. The concept of social territory helps to understand the articulation of welfare in rural-marginalised areas.

Abstract: A comprehensive approach to social well-being in peripheral non-urban areas involves examining its collective dimension and understanding how it manifests in various contexts and among different populations that are temporarily or permanently linked to these areas. This paper explores the impact of initiatives aimed at local socioeconomic revitalization through the reception of migrants. The study employs a qualitative methodology, including semi-structured interviews, participant observation, and focus groups. This article emphasizes the often-overlooked social dimension of well-being by investigating several cases from the Spanish and Italian peninsulas. It aims to shed light on the implications for rural areas undergoing revitalization, particularly in relation to concepts such as integration, location, and sustainability. To achieve this, the concept of social well-being is analyzed through four interconnected dimensions: a) social capital and social infrastructure, b) access to services and housing, c) homemaking, and d) environmental sustainability. Together, these dimensions help construct the notion of social territories, providing a foundation for understanding how well-being is developed in the peripheral rural areas of these two countries.

Keywords: Migration, marginality, rural areas, emplacement, Italy, Spain.

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Extended Abstract

In rural areas, studies on well-being are crucial for rethinking and reimagining the interconnections between ecological and social aspects and guiding public policies. However, policies often adopt a neoliberal and productivist approach, focusing primarily on economic or demographic aspects while neglecting the social dimension of well-being. This paper argues for understanding territory not merely as a physical space for resource access but as a site of daily experience and shared identities shaped by socio-historical contexts. Post-COVID-19, non-urban areas have been conceptualized as healthier environments, described as zones of well-being or refugee strategies, despite facing gradual abandonment. This reflects the relationship between cultural dimensions, social perceptions, economic issues, political settings, and collective imaginaries regarding rural territories. Some theoretical contributions attempt to offer more complex models of rural well-being based on sustainability, repositioning the links between territory and local communities at the centre of development processes. Concepts like *Sumak Kawsay* (or *good living*), for example, emphasize the importance of intertwining an ecological and social approach to non-urban territories. In this context, the social and collective dimensions of migrant people's well-being have often been overlooked in rural studies, particularly in Southern Europe. Studies on social welfare in rural areas of Italy and Spain have shown certain biases, such as the invisibility of historical transnational ties and the underrepresentation of migrant populations (immigrants or those seeking or benefiting from international protection). Migration, especially to rural areas, has sparked debates about its impact on welfare, particularly in perceived "homogeneous" rural contexts. Moreover, public policies have focused on the demographic challenge, particularly depopulation, disregarding other aspects of this multifaceted phenomenon, such as the link to territorial imbalances, sociopolitical changes, and economic factors. This process leads to a sustained decline in welfare, evidenced by an ageing population, a lack of public services, and rising unemployment. Solutions tend to focus on repopulation, overlooking alternatives like strengthening communities' competencies and skills without requiring population growth.

Regarding territorial rebalancing strategies, Italy and Spain have implemented policies favoring urban areas, while rural areas suffer from population loss. In Italy, the issue has been exacerbated by agricultural crises and the ageing of the local population. In Spain, the approach has been underdeveloped, with local policies playing a key role in welcoming migrant people to address the demographic challenge. This paper aims to address this gap by exploring how various initiatives

aimed at the reception of migrant people can enhance social well-being in peripheral and non-urban areas. This paper argues that understanding territories as multidimensional constructs—encompassing geographical, economic, emotional, relational, and environmental aspects—can lead to healthier discussions about migration and its impact on rural areas. By employing a qualitative methodology that includes semi-structured interviews, participant observation, and focus groups, this research investigates the implications of welcoming international newcomers in rural communities in Spain and Italy. The study employs multi-sited ethnographic fieldwork in Italy and Spain to explore how social well-being articulates in rural territories with newcomers reception initiatives.

To do so, it examines four interconnected dimensions: 1) social capital and infrastructure; 2) access to services and housing, 3) homemaking, and 4) environmental sustainability, ultimately contributing to a renewed understanding of collective well-being in these regions. These dimensions reflect the crucial factors that affect social well-being in rural and peripheral areas.

The first dimension, social capital and social infrastructure, highlights how specific spaces and networks promote social interactions and community cohesion. Social infrastructures, such as community spaces, facilitate trust and a sense of belonging, vital for new rural communities. However, challenges like racism, ethnic discrimination and lack of engagement may hinder this process, especially for newcomers. Secondly, the contribution addresses how migration intersects with access to services, focusing on healthcare, education, and housing. While urban areas typically offer better services, rural regions often struggle with accessibility, which negatively impacts the well-being of the whole community. Discrimination and perceived threats may also limit migrant people's access to these services. Housing, in particular, is a major challenge, with a paradox where vacant properties remain underutilized due to distrust of migrant people. Moreover, homemaking refers to the emotional and social ties individuals form with their new environment, contributing to a sense of home and community. Newcomers' emplacement is often shaped by how they build these connections, frequently influenced by power imbalances and unequal access to resources. Finally, the issue of environmental sustainability stresses the importance of an ecological perspective on well-being, considering both human and non-human agencies. Ecological living practices that promote long-term well-being must incorporate an understanding of migration, human-environment relationships, and shared resources.

The findings suggest that welcoming migrant people can significantly enhance the social fabric of rural communities by fostering new communities and supporting rural spaces. Hence, the research challenges the prevailing narrative that views migration solely as a challenge to be managed or a demographic tool to fight against

depopulation. It challenges neoliberal and extractivist approaches to territorial development and advocates for a broader concept of *public well-being*, as proposed by Fisher (2019), while emphasizing the importance of fostering genuine, long-term interactions between older and newly arrived populations to improve social well-being in rural areas. This can be achieved through processes of «generative hospitality» that benefit both the community and the new inhabitants by supporting their autonomy in various aspects of daily life and fostering environments where their aspirations can be fulfilled.

The research contributes to a deeper understanding of social well-being in rural, migration-receiving areas. However, more work is needed to explore each dimension in greater depth, as this could influence the development of public policies, which often emphasize demographic challenges like depopulation without considering other possibilities for promoting well-being. The contribution ends with the introduction of the concept of «social territory,» which frames well-being as a set of rights, expectations, and responsibilities within a community, advocating for a non-utilitarian view of migrant presence that supports community change. This approach emphasizes the importance of including migrant people in participatory processes that can foster collective opportunities and community-building. Despite challenges like inequalities and marginalization, many initiatives continue to thrive in peripheral areas, promoting a combination of hospitality, ecology, and community relations.