Extended abstract

Strategies against Depopulation: The Case of Commuting in a Extreme Rural Area of Northern Spain

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1. Introduction and rationale

Despite the fact that 84.7% of Spain’s national territory comprises rural land, inhabitants of these areas account for only 16.5% of the population. Indeed, since only the beginning of the 21st century the population of these areas has decreased by 9%. Spain’s inland regions have been those most badly hit by rural decline. For at least fifty years, in some cases for longer, these regions have been affected by depopulation, population aging, negative birth-rates, low population density, and an entirely unbalanced population structure in terms of both age and sex (Gómez-Pellón, 2004, 2017; Gómez-Pellón and Amaya, 2017; Esparcia, 2019; Moyano, 2020).

In the case study presented here, we analyse the situation in a particular rural area in the south of Cantabria: Los Valles, in the Campoo-Los Valles district which lies between the Cantabrian mountains and the Castilian plains. The paltry measures for rural development in place since 1994 as a result of the LEADER programme have been unable to halt the high rates of emigration that have been ongoing over the last seventy-five years (Delgado and Gil, 2008; Gómez-Pellón, 2012, 2018a). That this rural community continues to exist can be explained, at least partially, due to the region’s natural resources and the strong ties to the area felt by emigrants and their descendants. However, another element of the explanation may lie in the fact that the movement of people is periodic: over the space of a year the population swings between two extremes. The question we intend to investigate is the following: Can commuting, or mobility without a change of residence, halt the extreme exodus of people from a given rural area and be an efficient means of stabilising the population?

2. Objectives, methodology and sources, areas or case studies

This work is based on research that took place over several years, specifically from 2016 to 2019, and was made possible due to a government funded project. The subject of this study is a rural area in the Cantabrian mountains in the north of Spain, a geographic region somewhat less than 500 km² in extent and which, according to data from Spain’s
National Institute of Statistics (Instituto Nacional de Estadística: INE), had a population, in 2020, of 2,214 inhabitants. By conventionally recognised measures, the greater part of this territory would be considered extremely rural, that is, its general population density is less than 5 inhabitants per square kilometre. In order to complete this research, we adopted a qualitative methodology, however, as appropriate, the necessary quantitative data has been included. Thus, statistical information from several sources has been used, including from the INE, the Cantabrian Institute of Statistics (ICANE), and the Regional Ministry for the Environment of Cantabrian Government. Our qualitative data was gathered using 19 semi-structured interviews and 31 casual conversations, in addition this was supplemented with visual ethnography and participant observation. The objectives of this work are, on one hand, to analyse the effects of commuting on this Cantabrian mountain community and on the other, to determine whether there is any gender disparity in this phenomenon. To achieve these objectives, we will consider our data from two perspectives, that of lifestyle and that of gender.

3. Results

In the northern interior of Spain, between 30 and 40% of the population are aged over seventy-five years while only 8% are younger than 15 years of age. The ratio of males to females is, in general, 120 men to every 100 women and more than half of all males are unmarried. In general, 1-person households predominate. Massive levels of commuting, however, mean that despite its reduced, aging population, this rural community still survives. The phenomenon of commuting drives economic and social activities and contributes to territorial cohesion (Gómez-Pellón, 2018b).

The existing decoupling, in all economic sectors and among both sexes, between social security registration in the residence municipality and that recorded for the workplace municipality allows us to obtain an approximate measure of the levels of commuting in a marginal rural area such as the one studied here. Additionally, using a new database provided by the INE, we know that, currently, each day, between 11 and 16% of residents of our study area use their mobile phones in locations outside that region. Turning to whether there are differences between the seasonal movement of men and women, here, we find a very pronounced gender gap. Furthermore, our work supports the findings of a survey competed some years ago by the Cantabrian Government Environmental Research Agency the results of which were reported as a set of Sustainability Indicators (Indicadores de Sostenibilidad: 2010), which found that as a general rule, in rural municipalities, women made less than half the number of commuter journeys made by men.
Other results show that these southern municipalities see daily variation in the number of commuters arriving, including office-workers, professionals, and other employees arriving from population centres in neighbouring districts. Similarly, commuter movement at the weekends is also large. This is due to the fact that, alongside the factors already mentioned, there are others in play such as the importance of social capital manifesting in festivals, traditions, and customs which create a dense network of associations.

4. Discussion

The results of our work show a very pronounced gender gap in commuting behaviour, specifically, women take less than half as many commuter journeys as men. This is largely because these rural populations are markedly male dominated. Other factors also play a part, including the fact that we are dealing with exceptionally aging populations containing a high number of single men. It is clear that, in this context, traditional economic theories such as that outlined by Woolley (1999) and others, fall down. However, the ideas of Hanson and Pratt (1994) and Cristaldi (2005) concerning the spatial entrapment of women, for example, would have a significant relevance here.

There is a complementary explanation that might enable us to understand the commuting gender gap in the south of Campoo-Los Valles. It is possible that the increasing male to female ratio of this rural population is caused by what has been termed the “enlightened escape” of young women, a term used to describe the phenomenon of women leaving rural areas, often at a very young age, to pursue their education. In our case there is no support for Camarero and Sampedro’s (2008) observation that accessing education turns young women into potential commuters. Quite the reverse, the exodus of women with higher education qualifications seems to occur at the point in their lives when they have, in fact, finished their studies and acquire independence. In these circumstances, the predominance of male commuters can be explained simply by the low numbers of women in the local population. In short, the over representation of males among commuters correlates with the correspondingly higher rates emigration among females (Camarero, 2009).

5. Conclusions

In recent years, rural populations have relied increasingly on commuting as a strategy to access external labour markets. Rejecting the option of permanent
Highlights:

1. Commuting constitutes a frequent practice of access to extra-local labor markets.
2. Commuting is increasingly present in inland rural areas, under a wide typology.
3. The strongest point of commuting is that it can represent an important alternative to rural exodus.
4. The weakest point of commuting reveals a marked gender bias.
5. Commuting raises expectations for the future in areas beset by depopulation.

Abstract: Within the various existing degrees of rurality, this article sets the analysis in an area of extreme rurality in the mountainous interior of northern Spain, which brings together the characteristics of a declining rural space. The text contains a double objective, consisting of analyzing, on the one hand, the effects of the frequent practice of commuting among some of its inhabitants, and, on the other hand, examining whether a gender segmentation hides behind this practice. The methodology used has been characteristically qualitative, with a lifestyle and gender approach. The article discovers a rich variety of types of commuters, both with origin and destination in this rural mountain area. As a way of life, it represents a daily and constant migration, which, simultaneously, can be a solid alternative to the traditional permanent migration, with the consequent roots of the population. The phenomenon, promising for its ability to generate expectations for the future, and for having a favorable impact on territorial cohesion, shows, however, important weaknesses, because it reveals a desperate access of rural residents to extra-local labor markets, compatible with a growing globalization and with a marked gender gap.

Keywords: Rural flight; gender; territorial cohesion, rural environment, daily mobility.