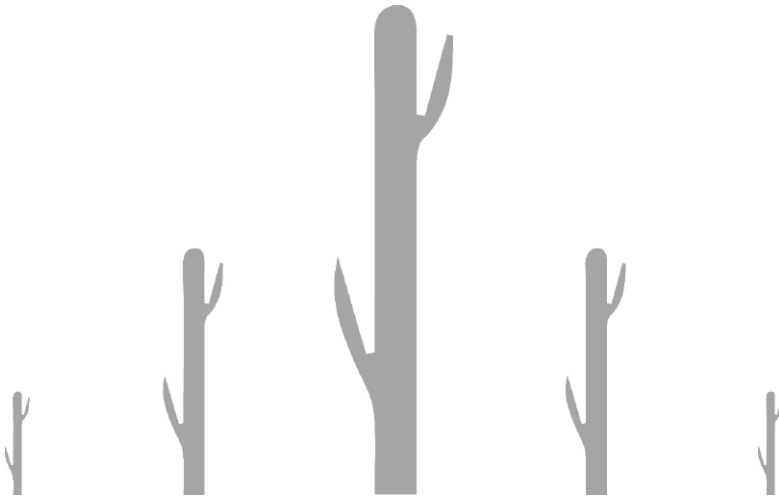


Extended abstract

*Depopulation Processes
in Southern Spain: the Case of the
Sierra del Segura Region (Albacete)*



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Highlights:

1. Depopulation is an increasingly evident phenomenon in rural areas of inland Spain.
2. The rural world is suffering from a significant ageing and masculinisation of its population.
3. Territorial isolation and the absence/closure of basic services drives demographic emptying.
4. The health crisis (Covid-19) has energised rural areas, but in a limited and temporary way.
5. The development of digitalisation and rural tourism can help to economically revitalise deprived rural areas.

Abstract: Since the middle of the last century, most rural areas in Spain have been subject to a significant process of depopulation. The Sierra del Segura Region (Albacete) is one of the rural areas most affected by depopulation. It is an area whose analysis is of great interest, as it has one of the lowest population densities in Europe and, at the same time, is located less than a hundred kilometres from one of the most populated areas of this continent (the Spanish Mediterranean coast). This territory has been little studied, a fact that motivates the development of this research, with the aim of analysing the intense depopulation experienced by this rural area, the causes that have generated it and the prospects for the future. To this end, the behaviour of different demographic, social and territorial indicators is evaluated and possible initiatives for action are discussed. The results obtained from the variables analysed show similarities with the processes occurring in the most depopulated areas of Spain. The development of digitalisation and rural tourism (following the emergence of Covid-19) could act as a starting point for the socio-economic dynamism of this area, generating attraction and fixation of the population in the territory. However, despite the promotion of these activities, the future does not look promising for the localities that make up this region.

Keywords: Rural; Demographics; Ageing; Tourism; Covid-19.

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Extended abstract

1. Introduction and justification

Along with climate change, depopulation is one of the most urgent and relevant challenges facing the planet today. However, this problem is not a recent one, but has been manifesting itself for decades. It is a phenomenon that is generally caused as a consequence of displacement from rural areas to urban spaces. In this sense, although it is a process that can affect different areas, including urban spaces, its effects are more noticeable when it affects rural areas. Thus, to a large extent, this rural exodus is caused by the social, economic and employment inequalities that exist between the two territorial areas.

The wide labour supply, generated as a result of the industrialisation process, together with the concentration of services and leisure/recreation activities in the large cities, are factors that drive rural-urban migration. This migratory flow empties the villages, generating ageing, increased mortality rates and a drop in birth rates, which translates into the impossibility of obtaining a generational renewal. In this context, while part of Spain shows an upward population dynamic, a third of its provinces suffer a continuous process of regression, with population peaks in the 50s of the last century.

Among the different areas affected by depopulation, this project focuses its attention on a little studied case: the Sierra del Segura Region (Albacete). This is a territory, made up of 12 municipalities, located in a mid-mountain area in the southeast of the Iberian Peninsula. Since the middle of the last century, this region has suffered a notable loss of population, and today it has one of the lowest population densities in Europe (almost all municipalities have less than 5 inhabitants per km²).

2. Objectives, methodology and sources

The main objective of this study is to analyse the significant demographic decline suffered by the Sierra del Segura Region (Albacete) since the middle of the last century. In order to respond to this general objective, other specific objectives are addressed, focusing on analysing both the distribution of the population over the

territorial area of the region, and attempting to explain the causes that may have caused and encouraged this phenomenon, the effects that the recent health crisis (Covid-19) may have had on its evolution, and its future prospects. To this end, the evolution experienced by different demographic indicators (vegetative growth, migratory balance, migration rates, birth and death rates, population ageing, percentage of foreigners, among others), social indicators (presence of basic services: educational centres, health centres or bank branches, level or distribution of income) and territorial indicators (accessibility) are evaluated.

The data provided by these indicators have been obtained from official sources such as the National Statistics Institute (INE) and its Nomenclature section, for population information; the atlas of household income distribution, for economic contrasts; those provided by the Ministry for Ecological Transition and Demographic Challenge to examine accessibility to first level health services (hospitals); the Bank of Spain to find out the evolution of banking institutions; or the Survey of Local Infrastructures and Equipment of the Ministry of Territorial Policy and Democratic Memory for information relating to units, places and students in educational centres.

3. Results

The results obtained show both the marked demographic decline and the concentration of current residents in the most important population centres. The causes of depopulation are diverse. In this respect, over the last few decades, all the municipalities in the region have experienced negative natural and migratory balances. Vegetative growth is weighed down by the significant ageing of the population, low birth rates and high mortality rates. For its part, the rural exodus is conditioned by the low level of income, gender inequalities, territorial isolation or the reduction of public services (education and health) and private services (banks) in relation to urban areas. All this, together with the poor data revealed by the variables that can change the population trend (average age of the population, representation of foreigners, young people of childbearing age, etc.), bodes ill for the future prospects of this territory.

4. Discussion

Until a few years ago, demographic work was limited to the study of the important development of the world's population and the problems that this

phenomenon could cause. This line of research merely masked the relevance of another demographic process that was emerging at great intensity, namely depopulation in rural areas. The relevance acquired by this last line of work has caused it to focus the attention of the current scientific-academic world.

Although depopulation processes have been occurring in Europe for centuries, the moment in time when these processes have acquired greater intensity varies from one area to another. Thus, in northern and central European countries, the most notable phase of depopulation occurred from the mid-19th century to the mid-20th century, with the phenomenon slowing down thereafter. On the other hand, as this research shows, it is from the middle of the 20th century onwards that depopulation acquires greater relevance in the rural areas of southern European countries.

In Spain, as in the rest of the European continent, the intensity of depopulation varies from one area to another and is most pronounced in the centre and north of the country. However, as has been seen in this work, there are certain geographical areas in the mid-mountains located in the southeast of the Iberian Peninsula which are experiencing depopulation processes similar to those recorded in territories located in the northern areas of Spain and Europe, which gives them a certain peculiarity.

5. Conclusions

The population trends revealed that the territory under analysis has been suffering an unprecedented demographic decline since 1950. The causes that have led to this situation have been diverse. Among them, we can highlight the reduced job opportunities or job offers in skilled jobs, the unequal level of income in relation to urban areas and the absence, disappearance or distance from basic services (education and health, among others). Given this scenario, the outlook for the future is not very promising.

To a certain extent, although the data on depopulation have improved as a result of the pandemic, this extraordinary event does not seem to be the element that will manage to repopulate rural areas. However, the boost given by the health crisis to the digitalisation of rural areas and inland tourism could be the starting point for attracting population and diversifying the economy. The evolution of this reality will be analysed over the years. In the meantime, it can only be affirmed that at present the territorial area analysed shows no signs of recovery.

6. Future directions

The methodologies and objectives to be addressed in future work should be oriented towards analysing the impact that the implementation of teleworking (driven by digitalisation) and tourism may have on the evolution of the seasonal and permanent population in rural areas. The evolution of these facts should be analysed in the coming years, which will allow for continuity and progress in this line of research. In addition, work focused on conducting interviews/surveys with local actors can provide important information on the causes that drive the rural exodus. The use of these qualitative techniques will complement this research in a relevant way.