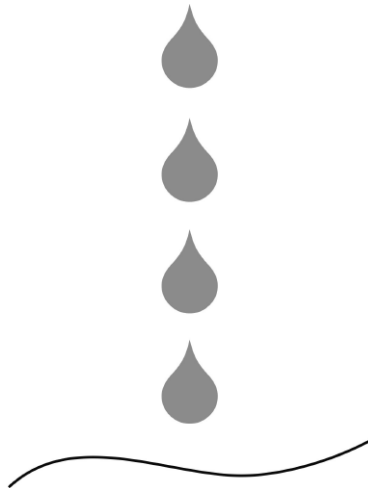


Extended abstract

*Statistical and Sociological
Considerations for the Development
of the Region of Sayago (Zamora, Spain)*



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***Statistical and Sociological Considerations for the Development of the Region of Sayago
(Zamora, Spain)***

Highlights:

1. It's not rural itself that is the driving force behind depopulation.
2. Development strategies must be in accordance with the socio-cultural characteristics and capacities of the region.
3. The job stability and a sense of rootedness are essential for long-term permanence.
4. Natural areas alone cannot be considered as a factor for rural development.

Abstract: Rural depopulation has become a problem that affects society as a whole through its political, economic and environmental impact. Despite the efforts made by institutions to reverse this process, the results obtained have not been as expected and the loss of population continues to be a constant. Therefore, the objective of this research would be to identify the existence of other underlying factors within the rural environment that could be taken into consideration by public administrations in their local development strategy, proposing the importance of the feeling of rurality as a working hypothesis. For this purpose, a statistical study has been carried out based on the assessment made by the mayors of the Sayago region (Zamora), in order to identify the main reasons that have led to depopulation and on the possible solutions to promote the development of the region. The results obtained indicate that although the policies applied are generally considered to be positive, they should be redirected towards strengthening those aspects considered being distinctively rural. In this sense, the importance of the feeling of being rooted in a community has been detected as a key element for the settlement of the population.

Keywords: Rurality, roots, neo-rural, public policies.

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Extended Abstract

1. Introduction and justification

To counteract the process of rural depopulation in Spain, public administrations have adopted solutions primarily based on economic standpoints, identifying the lack of job opportunities as one of the main reasons for abandonment. They have implemented a policy of subsidies, especially linked to the tourism sector, for the creation of entrepreneurial projects and other economic activities aimed at attracting new inhabitants. Although the applied policies have had a positive impact, it cannot be stated that the desired objectives have been fully achieved, as the depopulation process cannot be addressed exclusively from an economic approach due to its extremely complex nature.

Faced with a lack of effective solutions to halt this situation, it becomes necessary to explore alternative strategies, as well as to evaluate the existing public policies, which must be analysed considering the concept of rurality and carried out by those actors directly involved in the process. Additionally, we consider that the sense of identity has been an understudied factor in the stabilisation of the population in rural areas.

2. Objectives, methodology and sources

The aim of this research is to analyse the opinions of the mayors in the Comarca de Sayago (Zamora) regarding the depopulation process, through a questionnaire that will allow us to learn which factors, in their opinion, have caused depopulation, as well as the measures that could reverse this process.

We will focus our attention on three general questions that would help us identify the causal factors:

- The nature of the issue, based on the significance assigned by the respondents to a series of measures considered capable of halting depopulation.

- Differences between the reasons identified by the respondents as causing depopulation, and how these are regarded from an external point of view.
- The importance of aspects that may be unaffected by the public policies, such as identity-related elements or other determining factors for the consolidation of the population.

3. Results

3.1. Causes of rural depopulation

Out of the seven possible alternatives presented to respondents as causing rural depopulation, rated on a Linkert scale from 1 to 5, population ageing is perceived as the main problem, followed by a lack of infrastructure, social services, and the increase in educational levels.

3.2. Rural development and public policies

The aim of this section is to establish a subjective quantification of those political-administrative proposals considered the most effective in promoting rural development.

The result would indicate a high perceived utility for all the items presented, with an average rating of 4.96 for the 12 proposed initiatives, which is remarkably close to the maximum possible level of agreement (5).

3.3. Concerns for depopulation

Respondents state that the willingness shown by public bodies to fight depopulation stems from general socio-economic or political interests, instead of a specific concern for rural life.

3.4. Development of economic activities and tourism

The results indicate that, while the possibility of finding short-term employment is negative in all surveyed municipalities, that of starting a new business is positive in all of them.

3.5. New technologies and entrepreneurship

Respondents indicate that digital accessibility can be a decisive factor in attracting new inhabitants. Moreover, technological advances are also contributing to

change consumption patterns and the relationship between the rural world and the external environment.

4. Discussion

The mayors consider depopulation to be a severe problem, and therefore any corrective actions carried out by the administrations as essential for its solution.

Although the answers obtained regarding the main reasons for depopulation coincide with both the technical reports and the conducted research, there is a variation in the general opinion, which indicates that the reasons for the current depopulation cannot be attributed to the conditions of rural life per se, but rather to exogenous factors related to the lack of infrastructure and basic services. This notion is reflected in the fact that the rejection of agricultural work or the pursuit of a better future for the children is not relevant in the decision of leaving the village.

We believe that this opinion is motivated by the significant weight of the agricultural sector in the county's economy, conditioning a way of life that remains prevalent in the county and is not questioned. In this sense, when weighing the most effective measures for rural development, items related to the promotion of agriculture are placed at the same level of importance as the improvement of infrastructure and services. This reinforces the idea that agricultural activity is still considered a coherent and effective solution that should be valued by the administrations as a development policy.

Regarding the growing interest of society and institutions in depopulation, the result indicates that the most distinctive aspects of rural life, such as rural culture and quality of life, which logically should be promoted the most, are not included in the solutions designed by public bodies to address the problem.

As for the possibility of developing economic and touristic activities, there is a direct relationship between the municipality's size and the opening of new businesses. This suggests that starting new businesses depends more on internal consumption rather than on external or tourism-related aspects, so that the latter are considered as secondary.

Nevertheless, the tourism sector is viewed as a viable alternative for the development of self-employed professional activity, followed by agriculture and livestock farming as a second option. This thus reveals that the Sayago region has

endogenous growth potential for specific rural initiatives such as tourism, agriculture, transformation, etc., but it would face systemic difficulties on its development.

5. Conclusions

The reasons for the depopulation of the Sayago region should not be attributed to the rural lifestyle. On the contrary, the administration should place value and promote the cultural richness associated with it.

The necessity of enhancing the most autochthonous aspects of rural environments aligns with the importance given to rootedness and the sense of belonging as an essential element for population settlement. Likewise, rural lifestyle is not only undisputed, but also considered as a focal point of its own development, pointing to exogenous elements as the main causes of depopulation.

The exclusion of identity-related aspects in local development strategies is a mistake on the part of public policies, since these must be placed on the same level as economic initiatives to improve results.

6. Future directions

This research has attempted to explore the importance of rural sentiment as one of the factors that can prevent the depopulation process, albeit focused on a specific region with unique sociological traits. Nevertheless, the results obtained allow us to open different fields of research of a more ambitious nature regarding the importance of rootedness as a factor of population settlement, shown through the following questions:

- To what extent is rootedness a decisive factor in the fight against depopulation?
- What measures have been taken in this regard and with what results?
- What aspects are considered distinctively rural?
- Which ones can be or have been enhanced in different initiatives?
- Regarding the migrant population: to what extent has the creation of emotional ties influenced their permanence in rural localities?