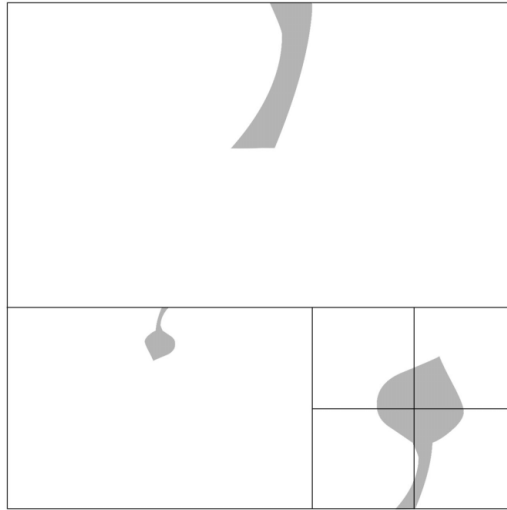


Extended abstract

*Citizen Engagement and Rural Development:
A Key Intangible Asset for Public Administration
and Local Action Groups
in Castilla y León (Spain)*



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Highlights:

1. Rural development is one of the main challenges of contemporary society.
2. The different public administrations have promoted rural development strategies, but with a lack of coordination and clear objectives.
3. The Local Action Groups (LAGs) promote rural development with a bottom-up approach, although they face economic and bureaucratic limitations.
4. Understanding the motivations of citizens that encourage their participation with LAGs and the public administration is key to promoting rural development.
5. Studying citizen engagement may provide clues in this regard.

Abstract: This research studies citizen engagement as a relevant intangible asset for both public administration and Local Action Groups (LAGs) in the context of depopulation in Castilla y León (Spain). Based on a literature review, we propose: 1) a content analysis to identify the actions likely to generate engagement in both the public administration and the LAGs and; 2) a survey of 44 participants from 11 LAGs to compare the level of engagement generated in these actions. Based on the results, it is confirmed that: 1) the intangible citizen engagement is relevant in the context of depopulation; 2) it is possible to differentiate citizen engagement actions promoted by the Administration and by the LAGs and; 3) citizens express their commitment to depopulation issues in different ways. When they get involved with the public administration they do so in political terms (manifest engagement) and when they collaborate with LAGs they do so in civic terms (latent engagement).

Keywords: Castile and León, Citizen Engagement, Communication, Depopulation, Citizen Participation.

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Extended abstract

1. Introduction

Rural development is one of the major challenges facing contemporary societies, particularly in Spain, where rural areas comprise more than 84 % of the national territory but are home to only 15 % of the population (Gallego, 2023). This stark imbalance points to a deep structural and social crisis marked by demographic aging, economic stagnation, and limited opportunities for innovation and employment. Although this problem has existed for decades, public policies have often failed to deliver effective or sustained responses (Alario y Morales, 2019; Molina, 2019; Collantes, 2020, 2021; Pinilla y Sáez, 2021; Cruz, 2023). In many cases, it has been the local citizenry that has initiated projects and mobilized action to counteract the effects of depopulation, demonstrating a collective commitment to the sustainable development of their territories.

In this context, rural depopulation reached a symbolic turning point with the 2019 "Revuelta de la España Vacía," a mass mobilization that drew attention to the institutional neglect of rural territories (Molina, 2019). Nevertheless, public responses have been scarce. Since the transition to democracy, only three national policies have directly addressed rural challenges: the 1982 Mountain Agriculture Act, the 1990s PRODER programs, and the 2007 Sustainable Rural Development Law (Collantes, 2020). Regional governments, such as Castilla y León, have also struggled to articulate coherent and effective rural strategies (Pinilla y Sáez, 2021).

Against this backdrop, LAGs emerged as key actors under the EU's LEADER initiative, tasked with implementing bottom-up, place-based development strategies. LAGs bring together local governments, civil society, businesses, and residents to diagnose problems and propose context-sensitive solutions (Esparcia et al., 2015; Leco, 2015). While their participatory nature makes them promising instruments for civic engagement, their potential has been limited by administrative burdens and centralized oversight that reduce their autonomy and innovative capacity (Esparcia et al., 2015). Nevertheless, their hybrid governance structure offers valuable insights into how citizen engagement can be institutionalized at the local level.

2. Objectives

Taking these facts as a starting point, this research explores citizen engagement as a key intangible asset for both public administration and Local Action Groups (LAGs) in the context of rural depopulation in Castilla y León, Spain. Specifically, this study investigates how citizen engagement operates within rural settings and how it is mediated by public institutions and LAGs.

Citizen engagement is understood as the voluntary and intentional participation of individuals and groups in public life, aimed at improving collective outcomes (Arnstein, 1969; Ebdon y Franklin, 2006; World Bank, 2014; Piqueiras, 2020). In rural areas, where social cohesion and emotional ties to place are strong, engagement often takes the form of civic involvement in community initiatives. These engagements, however, are shaped by institutional frameworks that either facilitate or hinder citizen participation. In this regard, public administration and LAGs represent two distinct but complementary avenues through which engagement is expressed and institutionalized.

The theoretical foundations of the research draw on a broad body of literature that views engagement as a multidimensional and context-dependent concept (Adler y Goggin, 2005; Piqueiras, 2020). Engagement includes political and civic dimensions, encompassing both formal mechanisms such as voting or public consultations and informal practices such as volunteering or participating in community organizations (Verba y Nie, 1972; Morin, 1996; Putnam, 2000; Cooper, 2005). Ekman and Amnå (2012) further differentiate between manifest engagement (visible, political actions) and latent engagement (informal, less visible contributions to the public sphere). Both forms are crucial in understanding how citizens relate to institutions and exercise agency in shaping their environments.

Despite its relevance, measuring engagement remains methodologically complex. As an intangible asset, it cannot be captured through a single indicator. However, some scholars have proposed multidimensional models to approximate its contours. Piqueiras (2020), for instance, draws from the intangible assets framework by Canel and Luoma-aho (2017, 2018) to identify four key dimensions of citizen engagement in the public sector: institutional trust, political behavior, social behavior, and receptiveness. Trust serves as both a motivator and a barrier to engagement; political behavior reflects formal participation; social behavior includes civic activities; and receptiveness captures the perceived openness of institutions to citizen input.

These categories provide a useful structure for empirical measurement and allow for comparison across different institutional contexts.

3. Methodology

This research contributes to the literature by empirically measuring citizen engagement in rural Castilla y León through a two-pronged methodology. First, a content analysis was conducted to identify the types of actions that trigger engagement by both public administration and LAGs. Second, a survey was administered to 44 individuals involved with 11 LAGs across the region to assess the forms and intensity of citizen engagement with these two institutional actors.

4. Results

The findings confirm the initial hypothesis: citizens tend to demonstrate manifest, political engagement with public administration (such as contacting officials, voting, or participating in consultations) whereas their engagement with LAGs is more latent and civic, expressed through informal interactions, volunteering, and collaborative projects. These differences reflect not only the institutional roles of each actor but also the expectations and trust citizens place in them.

Moreover, the results highlight that while institutional trust is simply acceptable for public administration, it is higher for LAGs. Finally, receptiveness is perceived as higher in LAGs, which are seen as more responsive and open to citizen input. These findings suggest that enhancing engagement in rural development requires differentiated strategies: public administration must improve transparency and responsiveness to build trust, while LAGs should be supported to strengthen their participatory and community-building roles.

5. Conclusions

In sum, this research contributes to the theoretical and empirical understanding of citizen engagement as a public sector intangible in rural settings. It identifies differentiated patterns of engagement with public administration and LAGs and offers

a framework for measuring these interactions in a structured way. By applying this model in Castilla y León, the study underscores the importance of trust, participation, and institutional design in activating civic commitment, especially in territories facing demographic and developmental decline.