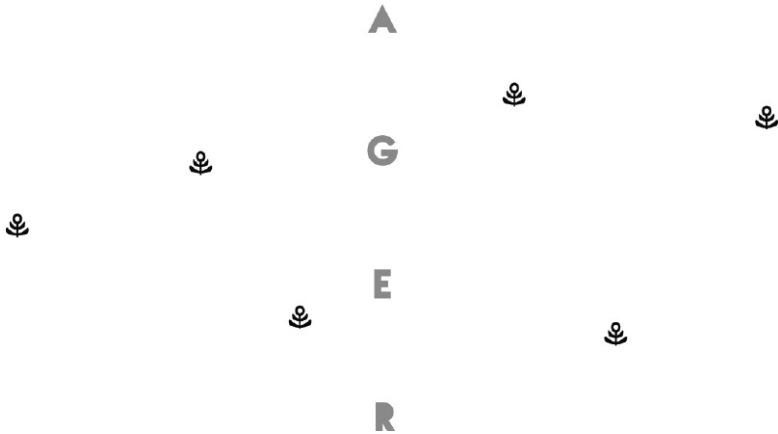


Extended abstract

*Life in Rural Andalusia during the
Pandemic: A Turning Point for a
Renewed Appreciation of its Value?*



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Highlights:

1. The inhabitants of rural areas think they "got through the COVID19 pandemic better" than city-dwellers.
2. This is because of various factors such as better housing conditions, natural environment and social relations in rural areas.
3. The degree of rurality is an important factor when assessing the conditions in which residents have had to spend the pandemic.
4. The pandemic is viewed as an opportunity for stemming, at least in part, the depopulation of rural territories.
5. Remote working and rural tourism can encourage people to move back to the country, so initiating rural repopulation, albeit with limitations.

Abstract: Within a context of severe depopulation of many rural areas of Spain and Andalusia, and although now they are not the only ones affected by this phenomenon, the COVID19 pandemic, setting aside the tragedy that it entailed for the population as a whole and the deaths that it caused, is seen as a possible turning point that could reverse or at least halt the depopulation of rural areas. With this in mind, in this research, we explore the perceptions of the inhabitants of rural areas regarding the conditions in which local people got through the period of lockdown and restrictions and how this may affect the future of their areas. To this end, in 2021 we carried out a total of 114 in-depth interviews in 20 municipalities of Andalusia. The interviewees were classified according to different sociodemographic profiles and the types of area in which they lived. The results highlight that the perception they have is that they got through the pandemic better than city-dwellers to the extent that they enjoyed "better" conditions in terms of housing, access to open spaces, greater social distancing, and greater solidarity between the local residents. Most of them also think that these effects could serve to a greater or less extent to help stem depopulation.

Keywords: Rural depopulation, health crisis, opportunity for rural areas, demographic recovery, quality of life.

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Extended Abstract

1. Introduction and justification

One of the most important challenges facing European society in the medium and long term is the "demographic challenge". Serious problems such as aging and depopulation are also affecting rural areas of Andalusia, a region marked by profound historic disadvantages, and where the cultural gap between rural and urban has yet to be bridged. During the COVID-19 pandemic, cities became increasingly viewed as hostile spaces and people began to look towards rural areas as safe places to live. However, studies show that big changes have not taken place in rural demographic dynamics, that second homes were a key feature in this process and that its effects varied considerably from territory to territory, with preference being given to periurban areas with good access to public and private services and especially to the Internet.

2. Objectives, methodology and sources

We asked ourselves various questions. What were people's experiences of the pandemic in rural areas of Andalusia? What were the advantages compared to urban areas? Did the pandemic affect depopulation processes? Was it really a turning point for the increased appreciation of rural areas? To answer these questions, we employed a qualitative methodology developed as part of a broader research study aimed at finding out what Andalusian people think about depopulation.

Using the snowball technique, we carried out semi-structured, face-to-face interviews in a total of 20 towns in Andalusia classified into six groups according to their degree of population growth or decline: extreme depopulation, high depopulation, slight depopulation, increasing population, sharply increasing population, and urban. In each of these towns, interviews were carried out with people from six sociodemographic profiles viewed as important in rural areas, leading to a total of 120 planned interviews of which 114 were finally carried out. These profiles were women, young people (18-30 years old), people over 64, businesspeople, political representatives and local experts.

3. Results

The people we interviewed were strongly convinced that people got through the pandemic better in rural areas than in urban. Various factors were identified as advantages of the rural world within the context of the pandemic. Firstly, the predominant type of housing in these areas, which was considered a determining factor. The location of people's homes, the fact that they are larger and have access to the outside improved aspects such as family coexistence, the distance between workspaces, physical activity and mental health among others. Secondly, access to natural areas near home was considered as beneficial for the quality of life. Thirdly, the low population density made social distancing easier and reduced the probability of spreading the disease, so helping people feel calmer and safer. Fourthly, social control was considered a dissuasive factor when it came to infected people breaking lockdown rules, as a small number of inhabitants makes it easier to know who has the disease. Lastly, the collaboration between civil society, public institutions and private organizations was fundamental for meeting the needs of the population and in particular of the most vulnerable members of society.

These advantages were identified in the smallest, most remote municipalities, which were undergoing depopulation processes of varying intensity. By contrast, the more dynamic rural areas where population is increasing were not considered to have benefited so much during the pandemic. Even though type of housing and nearness to nature were cited as relevant factors, the personal situation of each interviewee varied depending on the particular characteristics of their home and on whether it was centrally located or was closer to the natural surrounding area.

As regards the effects of the pandemic on depopulation, in the municipalities that were suffering most from this problem, it was generally considered to have had a positive effect on attracting population, tourists and visitors, in what they regarded as increased appreciation of rural areas. However, this greater power of attraction was due to people using their second homes during the period when it was possible to work remotely, and most went back to the cities once things had returned to normal. By contrast, in the towns in which population was increasing, the interviewees tended to focus on whether moving to rural areas was really possible in that remote working, owning a second home or having the financial capacity to buy one were all viewed as essential requirements.

Whether the pandemic actually served as a point of inflection to stem depopulation is a question with which some agree and others take issue. The most

optimistic emphasize that to achieve these changes, people must be guaranteed a way of making a living, associated with having a job, something that must be promoted by the town councils themselves.

4. Discussion and conclusions

The rural areas of Andalusia, and indeed of Spain in general, "benefited" from the pandemic with an increase in their population. The really important question however is whether these increases will be permanent. The most recent studies indicate that repopulation is more a question of media hype than of real change and is territorially very uneven. Even so, the migratory balance in Andalusia remains positive in the areas with the highest levels of depopulation, something that is viewed as a success by the people we interviewed, even at identity level, in favour of the enhanced appreciation and value of rural areas.

This increase in population was strongly influenced by the chance to work and study online, which are regarded as essential requirements to enable people to move to rural areas. However, recent studies are highly sceptical about the potential of remote working to halt depopulation especially in the most inland areas, both because of the limitations on Internet access and because of the reluctance to move to these areas. In addition, most working people cannot do their jobs remotely.

Although this capacity to attract people was viewed as a sign of increased appreciation of what rural areas have to offer, it was also considered essential that certain minimum living conditions should be guaranteed, above all in terms of employment. In fact, for 92.8% of those interviewed, the lack of employment was viewed as the fundamental cause of depopulation. The profile of the people moving to rural areas is of young, middle/upper class adults attracted by an idyllic vision of rural life as a symbolic element of social distinction, and of foreign people with high incomes. The people we interviewed emphasized that in the absence of family ties, only those with sufficient financial capacity could afford to move these areas.

The people we interviewed regarded rural areas as safer from the pandemic with lower probabilities of the spread of the disease, greater social control and improved mental health due to factors relating to the type of housing, the proximity to natural spaces and less restrictions. In addition to the enhanced quality of life in these spaces, their collaboration and solidarity mechanisms allow people to reach the most vulnerable groups and in particular the elderly. These aspects, which have

become features of rural identity, are perceived as essential for social and territorial resilience. With all this, we must not forget that the inhabitants of rural areas also suffer from stress arising from economic problems, 'poor Internet connections and access to public and private services, all of which are key aspects when it comes to deciding to leave or move to these areas.

The people we interviewed stressed that the different public administrations should have viewed the pandemic as an opportunity in the fight against depopulation. They also complained that the particularities of these areas were not taken into account in the different measures implemented. This finding is in line with research studies which argue that the processes that drive depopulation vary from one territory to the next and that although they may have similar results, the local socioeconomic contexts, which are unique, must be taken into account so as to implement effective solutions adapted to each of these contexts. This diversity was observed in the interviews when comparing the opinions of residents of areas with a declining population with others in which it was rising.

To make the most of this opportunity provided by the pandemic, it is important to address issues such as greater flexibilization of working hours to enable people to choose to work remotely. Accompanied by the necessary infrastructures and services, this would encourage some of the people (perhaps not all initially) who have left rural areas to return home. From this perspective, there must be formal recognition, within the context of public policies and especially those directly related with rural development, of the differences between the rural areas which are being drained of population and those in which it is rising. It is therefore important to accept not only that the former are a priority objective of these interventions but also that the rural perspective must be taken into account in all public actions. This so-called "Rural Proofing" is known in Spain as the Rural Guarantee Mechanism.

5. Focus of future research

Future lines of research could include a more in-depth comparative analysis of the different sociodemographic profiles, and of the demographic behaviour in the towns and villages in Andalusia during and after the COVID-19 pandemic. A quantitative and qualitative study of access to public and private services for those living in each of these areas could also be performed.