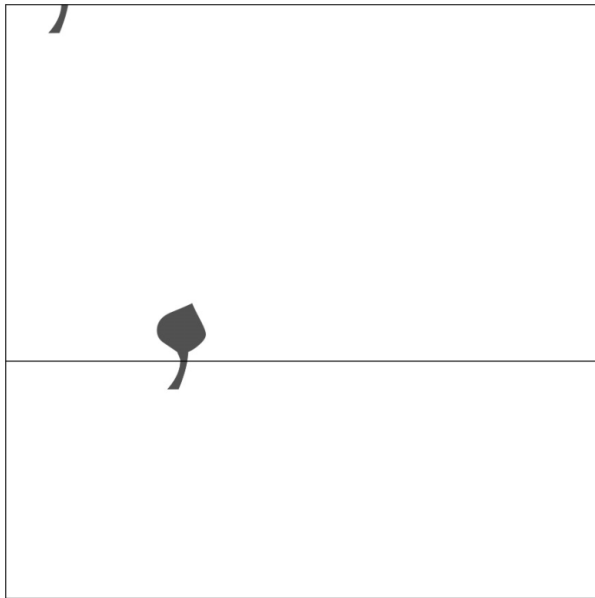


Extended abstract

*Depopulation, Well-being and Deliberative
Participation in the Rural Districts of Lorca,
Region of Murcia, Spain*



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DOI: 10.4422/ager.2026.11

ager

Revista de Estudios sobre Despoblación y Desarrollo Rural
Journal of Depopulation and Rural Development Studies

Highlights:

1. Factors influencing population retention in rural areas are linked to perceptions of public safety and environmental issues, in addition to the socioeconomic factors traditionally associated with rural depopulation.
2. Compared to other tools, deliberative mini-publics can offer a broader and more diverse perspective on social issues such as depopulation.
3. Citizen participation can help shape more effective public policies to address population decline.

Abstract: This article analyzes the dynamics of depopulation in the districts of Lorca (Region of Murcia) from a participatory perspective. We begin with the growing concern over the demographic decline in rural areas of Spain. In this context, we propose the use of "deliberative mini-publics" as an innovative mechanism for citizen participation capable of generating more diverse, inclusive, and representative assessments of social issues. The methodology involved conducting a civic lottery to randomly select 60 participants, ensuring diversity in terms of gender, age, and geographic origin. The deliberative process was structured into different phases of information sharing, learning, and group discussion, with the support of subject-matter experts and specialized facilitators. The results indicate the existence of common demands across the various regions analyzed, aspects previously identified in the literature on rural depopulation. However, the emergence of new factors that may drive rural depopulation is also observed, such as those related to perceptions of public safety and environmental issues.

Keywords: Depopulation, Deliberative mini-publics, Drivers of depopulation, Rural districts of Lorca.

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Extended Abstract

1. Introduction and Rationale

Rural depopulation is one of the most significant territorial challenges facing contemporary Spain. Its consequences go beyond mere population decline, affecting economic sustainability, the provision of public services, social cohesion, and the quality of life of the resident population. Although public policies aimed at combating depopulation have traditionally focused on economic factors, infrastructure, and access to services, several recent studies point to the need to incorporate the citizens' perspective to better understand the causes and consequences of this phenomenon.

In this context, the article examines depopulation dynamics in the rural districts (*pedanías*) of the municipality of Lorca, located in the Region of Murcia. Lorca provides a particularly relevant case study due to its extensive territory, dispersed population, and the considerable differences that exist among its rural areas. Despite the municipality's growth in recent decades, many of its rural districts have experienced population decline, an aging population, and the weakening of their community structures.

This research is motivated by the need to identify not only the traditional drivers of demographic decline but also less visible factors that influence residents' well-being and their willingness to remain in rural areas. Furthermore, the use of deliberative mini-publics is proposed as an innovative tool for incorporating citizens' voices into the assessment of rural problems and the design of potential solutions. The study aims to demonstrate that participatory processes can help identify aspects that are often overlooked in conventional analyses and that may prove crucial for understanding depopulation in all its complexity.

2. Objectives, Methodology, and Sources

The main objective of the study is to analyze citizens' perceptions of depopulation and community well-being in the rural districts of Lorca through a participatory deliberative process. More specifically, the research aims to identify the principal prob-

lems associated with population decline, compare perceptions across different rural territories, systematize policy proposals, and assess the potential of deliberative mini-publics as a tool for developing more inclusive public policies.

Methodologically, the study adopts the approach of an interpretive case study focused on the rural districts of Lorca. The primary research method is the deliberative mini-public, a participatory mechanism based on the random selection of citizens and informed deliberation on issues of public concern.

To ensure social and territorial diversity, sixty participants were selected through a civic lottery based on the Municipal Population Register. The sample was structured according to criteria of gender, age, and geographical origin, ensuring balanced representation from the Upper, Middle, and Lower Districts (*Pedanías Altas, Medias y Bajas*). Due to population dispersion, the recruitment process required several rounds of selection and extensive personal contact.

The research was conducted in two main stages. The first consisted of an information and learning phase, during which experts in territorial development and depopulation provided participants with knowledge about rural demographic dynamics and examples of successful policy interventions. The second stage focused on group deliberation, organized into six discussion groups moderated by researchers from the University of Murcia.

The principal sources of information were participants' contributions during the deliberative sessions and the complete transcripts of the discussions. These materials enabled a qualitative analysis based on emerging thematic categories related to depopulation, well-being, and policy recommendations.

3. Results

The findings reveal that depopulation manifests itself differently across the territories analyzed.

In the Upper Districts, depopulation is perceived as an already consolidated reality. Participants directly associate population loss with the gradual reduction of public services, demographic ageing, and a widespread feeling of institutional neglect. Major concerns include transportation difficulties, the disappearance of school bus

routes, insufficient services for older adults, and a lack of family support and childcare facilities. Housing constraints and perceptions of unfair taxation compared to Lorca's urban center were also highlighted. Territorial attachment emerged as a central theme, with residents expressing a strong desire to remain in their communities and ensure that future generations can do the same.

In the Lower Districts, the primary concern is the progressive outmigration of young people and the relocation of older adults to areas with better access to services. Participants identified problems related to education, infrastructure, public transportation, housing, and the decline of the primary sector. A strong perception of territorial deterioration and institutional disconnection was observed. A recurring argument was that public policies should prioritize retaining current residents rather than focusing exclusively on attracting newcomers.

The Middle Districts present a different scenario. Although some areas have experienced demographic growth or stability, participants expressed concerns about public safety, environmental pollution, flood risk, and limited access to housing. They also emphasized challenges related to social integration and the long-term attachment of immigrant populations. Here, the main concern is not immediate population decline but rather the future sustainability of social cohesion and community well-being.

Across all three territories, young people, women with caregiving responsibilities, and older adults emerged as particularly vulnerable groups. Participants also shared a common perception of institutional distance and insufficient attention to the specific needs of rural districts.

4. Discussion

The findings confirm that depopulation is a multidimensional phenomenon that cannot be explained solely through economic or demographic variables. While participants identified problems widely recognized in the academic literature –such as service loss, housing constraints, and economic weakness– the study also reveals less explored factors that may significantly influence decisions to remain in or leave rural areas.

Among these emerging factors, perceptions of public insecurity and environmental problems are particularly noteworthy. Concerns about theft, pollution, flood risks, and environmental degradation appear to play an important role in shaping sub-

jective well-being and residents' expectations for the future. This finding broadens traditional interpretations of rural depopulation and challenges the assumption that rural areas enjoy comparative advantages in terms of security and environmental quality.

The research also highlights the importance of social capital and territorial attachment. The decision to remain in rural districts is influenced not only by economic opportunities but also by family ties, community networks, and the possibility of developing meaningful life projects within the territory. In this regard, deliberative processes not only generate valuable information for policymakers but also contribute to strengthening social cohesion and a sense of belonging.

Furthermore, the study demonstrates that purely technical solutions or top-down policy approaches are insufficient for addressing the complexity of rural depopulation. Citizen participation emerges as a mechanism capable of enhancing policy legitimacy and incorporating perspectives that are often absent from institutional diagnoses.

5. Conclusions

The principal conclusion of the study is that rural depopulation should be understood as a complex and territorially differentiated phenomenon. The factors explaining population decline vary according to the characteristics of each rural area and cannot be reduced solely to employment opportunities or service availability.

The research demonstrates the existence of additional dimensions related to public safety, environmental conditions, quality of life, and perceptions of institutional recognition, all of which significantly influence residents' willingness to remain in rural communities. It also confirms that the effects of depopulation are unevenly distributed across social groups, particularly affecting young people, women, and older adults.

Moreover, deliberative mini-publics prove to be a valuable tool for producing more comprehensive, inclusive, and representative assessments of rural challenges. Their ability to incorporate diverse experiences and foster informed dialogue enables the identification of needs and priorities that might otherwise remain invisible through conventional research or participatory methods.

Ultimately, the study concludes that anti-depopulation policies must be adapted to the specific circumstances of each territory, prioritizing the improvement of living conditions for existing residents while strengthening mechanisms for citizen participation.

6. Future Directions

Future research should further explore the dynamics identified in this study through longitudinal analyses capable of examining how these processes evolve over time and assessing the long-term impact of public interventions. It would also be advisable to incorporate more detailed sociodemographic variables, such as educational attainment, occupation, and length of residence, to better understand the diversity of perspectives within rural populations.

In addition, comparative studies across different rural territories would help identify common patterns, transferable strategies, and examples of best practice. From a policy perspective, there is a need to consolidate permanent structures for citizen participation that facilitate continuous dialogue between institutions and local community.

Finally, future policies should move toward more participatory and territorially differentiated governance models, paying close attention to the specific needs identified in each type of rural district. Combining improvements in public services, community strengthening, public safety, and environmental protection may provide a more effective strategy for ensuring the demographic and social sustainability of rural territories.