

***Extended abstract***

*Rural population after the economic  
crisis and post-crisis: Regressive,  
resilient, and dynamic municipalities  
(Catalonia, Spain)*



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*Highlights:*

1. The 2009 demographic dichotomy between dynamic and regressive municipalities has been modified.
2. After the economic crisis and the subsequent recovery, municipalities are now divided into three groups.
3. The less economically and demographically dynamic rural municipalities, have accentuated their population loss.
4. Rural municipalities that are mainly dedicated to tourism and services, currently have stagnant population figures.
5. Only outer suburban municipalities, located at the outskirts of urban and metropolitan areas, have grown.

*Abstract:* A previous analysis of the 1998-2009 period, marked by the international migratory boom, showed that, after decades losing population, Catalan municipalities with less than a thousand inhabitants had positive population growth. However, they faced extremely different situations. Indeed, while tourist municipalities or those located near metropolitan areas had relevant population growth, in others, immigration was not able to reverse population decline. The present research analyses whether ten years later, and after an intense economic crisis followed by a few years of a slight population and economic recovery, this dichotomy still exists or is even more pronounced. The clusters obtained a decade ago have been retaken and population changes in each of those categories analysed by adding 2009-2019 *Padrón Continuo* and demographic change data. Our results show that there are presently three groups of municipalities: villages that then had a recessive population, have presently accelerated their depopulation; those mainly dedicated to tourism and the service sector, have a stagnant population; and only a final small group of outer suburban communities, located at the outskirts of urban areas, have grown.

*Keywords:* Depopulation, ageing, economic cycle, demographic dynamics, Catalonia.

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## **1. Introduction**

After decades of demographic regression linked with rural exodus, the international migratory boom at the start of this century represented a change of tendency in some smaller municipalities, which promoted their growth (Camarero *et al.*, 2013), and it was even believed that this could represent an opportunity for a demographic turning point (Collantes *et al.*, 2014). The fact that the 2008 economic crisis abruptly appeared meant a majority return to regressive dynamics. In this context, we analyse the situation of small Catalan (N Spain) municipalities in different economic cycle phases, particularly the role that immigration plays in an attempt to counteract depopulation. We firstly started with an analysis (Bayona-i-Carrasco & Gil-Alonso, 2013) with data from the 1998-2009 period. It established a typology that grouped the municipalities with fewer than 1,000 inhabitants into five categories. Would the existing dichotomy have been heightened after passing an economic crisis followed by some years of certain recovery?; what role have international and internal migrations played in heightening or mitigating these differences?; would this mean that the migratory contribution is currently a fundamental (and sufficient?) component to counteract depopulation?

## **2. Objectives, methodology and sources**

Here the main objective is to analyse the demographic evolution of small Catalan municipalities in economic expansion, crisis and post-crisis phases by applying an already verified typology to study if the last two of the aforementioned economic cycle phases have heightened or mitigated the differences in growth between dynamic and recessive municipalities. We particularly analysed the role played by international and internal migrations. Finally, we reflect on the importance of migrations for counteracting rural depopulation from the public policies perspective.

A previously created typology of municipalities was used (Bayona-i-Carrasco & Gil-Alonso, 2013), based on an analysis of the Continuous Register of the Population and its Natural Movements data from the 1996-2009 period. Population growth was calculated according to nationality, and growth components (natural and migratory growth) were added, as were the foreign population percentages at the beginning

(1998) and end (2009) of the period. By means of a hierarchical clustering analysis, 480 municipalities were classified as five categories. Three of them underwent positive demographic growth and were differentiated for their intensity as follows: low (T-3), medium (T-4) and high (T-5). Conversely, the trends in the remaining two categories were less positive: one was stagnated (T-2) and the other's negative dynamics continued (T-1). Differences in demographic growth were not only due to their location, but also to their unequal economic structure.

### **3. Results**

#### ***Population growth: modification to the old dichotomy***

During the 2007-2010 period, population growth declined in parallel to economic recession, with a negative evolution that would heighten during the 2013-2016 period. The slower subsequent recovery was scarcely noted in the population's evolution because the population of small municipalities continued to decline. Notwithstanding, the demographic drop was less intense than the growth recorded during the boom, which means that today's population is still bigger than in 1998. However, this piece of information does not hide a regressive trend because the populations of only the most dynamic municipalities (T-5) managed to positively grow. The other categories lost inhabitants, their population became stagnated (T-3 and T-4) or their behaviour was more regressive (T-1 and T-2). It is noteworthy how all five typologies showed the same hierarchy during the three study periods, which means that the distance among demographic dynamics remained.

#### ***The migratory component is less relevant***

For small municipalities, natural dynamics was clearly negative during the four contemplated periods, which corresponded to ageing populations. However, migrations were positive during economic expansion. The five types were only differentiated for their intensity, which went from minimum to highly intensive growth. Thus migrations determined the sign and intensity of total growth. Conversely in the crisis and post-crisis phases, migratory balances became negative or lost intensity. This implies that migrations assumed a secondary role and natural dynamics became more important, most with regressive cases, for shaping these municipalities' demographic evolution.

### ***International immigration is not a solution to depopulation***

International immigration in small municipalities has become relatively stagnated and, hence, this quota is not expected to be the solution to depopulation. The economic crisis implied a declining immigrant population, followed by people arriving from abroad and the population starting to recover in the post-crisis phase. These dynamics diverged in the categories, but then coincided with their low intensity. The proportion of foreign immigrants even lowered in two of the three more dynamic categories because of the impact that the crisis had on the building sector.

Conversely in those municipalities with more regressive dynamics (T-2 and T-1), the relevance of immigration continued to increase because of native inhabitants' higher death and emigration rates, but also because the attraction of these municipalities, which still had an effect during the crisis. They have more a deeply rooted agricultural sector, which has been less affected by the recession. Notwithstanding, they were incapable of reversing the negative dynamics, and the migratory balance was regressive among native inhabitants.

### ***Population structures: small municipalities' differential ageing***

The rejuvenation stage ended with the crisis and international immigration decline, and the percentage of people over the age of 65 rose again. This process also took place in small municipalities, albeit with a lesser impact on already ageing structures. The more regressive municipalities underwent the most marked ageing process (T-1 with 29.7%). However, the most dynamic ones (T-5) were characterized by a better gender balance and having a younger population. This suburban population profile corresponds to those baby boomer groups that have decided to change their homes to rural municipalities before the economic crisis began to seek a better quality of life.

## ***4. Discussion***

The economic crisis brought an end to the previous marked population growth. Since 2014 a slight recovery has been observed with weak and unequal territorially growth, but this recovery has barely been noted in smaller sized municipalities. The representation of the immigrant population, which has been seen as a salvation life-line, even increased without counteracting the loss of native inhabitants. The rural municipalities have, on the whole, managed to maintain the previously attracted for-

eight population. This confirms that rural areas have acted as a refuge in the recessive economic phase because the crisis has affected agriculture less, especially those grouped as T-1 and T-2.

International immigration has been significantly relevant because it has managed to slow down depopulation, but it has not sufficed to counteract regressive demographic trends. This means that international immigration itself is not a solution to depopulation. On the contrary, it would seem that the internal migration of native inhabitants has played a more significant role in the more dynamic municipalities.

## **5. Conclusions**

The performed analysis indicated that small municipalities did not follow the same patterns. The five obtained types were transformed into three groups: 1) "regressive" municipalities (T-1 and T-2), which are less dynamic in economic and demographic terms and are still relevant with the agricultural sector. All this heightens their ageing and depopulation despite the immigrant population's increased relevance; 2) "resilient" municipalities (T-3 and T-4), which focus on tourist and service activities, but have a practically stagnated population; 3) "dynamic" municipalities (T-5), which continue to grow. Most are located on metropolitan outskirts.

Our results show that, from the public policies point of view, how fragile the strategies to fight depopulation are if they are based on attracting foreign immigration. So a much bigger volume will be necessary to counteract the regressive dynamics of native inhabitants. Conversely, the greater success of the municipalities that manage to also draw populations formed by native inhabitants might inspire public rural development policies. This strategy, which is very appropriate in times of COVID-19 and teleworking, leads us to wonder if this population-attracting policy, whose success apparently depends on emplacement, would be hard to export to less accessible municipalities or those with less tourist interest.

## **6. Future guidelines**

The impact that the COVID-19 pandemic has had will be an area to focus on in the future. This new crisis has arrived before recovering from the previous crisis. So

one question remains: whether the incipient residential dynamics of residential dispersion as a result of confinement is acquiring certain intensity and territorial extension, or if it merely represents an interval. The hypothetical "return to the country" might heighten the already known dichotomy. Rural development policies will have to be designed by bearing this fact in mind so that more isolated municipalities and those worse communicated with more dynamic ones can also benefit from their demographic diffusion.