

LIGHTS AND SHADOWS OF SOCIAL SERVICES IN SPANISH RURAL AREAS

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ABSTRACT

The objective of this research is to address social policies in Spanish rural areas; social actors involved were on one hand professionals (social services and other areas) and on the other hand the inhabitants, to discern the actions undertaken to improve the current situation of the Spanish countryside.

This article aims to determine the coverage of social services and establishes the valuation that rural inhabitants make about that. Therefore we try to show the strengths and weaknesses to enhance the former and minimize the latter.

We identify the barriers posed to the territory when implementing social policies as well as on the institutional framework of social services.

The interviews have shown two novel indicators that help or hinder social policies: "The Castilian character" and inter- and intra-municipal disputes. They also report results that we did not expect as the contrast between the speech of citizens and professionals of Social Services, the lack of enthusiasm of the professionals on the future social context in which they work or terminological inexactitude of citizens in relation to social services.

The solution to rural areas does not go through the gradual increase of one service after the other independently. However a proper coordination of these services will achieve an efficient improvement, optimizing existing resources, avoiding overlap of activities and providing rural areas a better coverage at all levels. Socio-economic policies must also take into account the intrinsic reality of each area, but a priori, not a posteriori as it often happens.

The Spanish inhabitants, according to the different characteristics of the habitat where they live, have access to the use of different services. Social Services must perform the necessary measures and actions to promote equal opportunities for all citizens, paying special attention to the disadvantaged for personal, economic, cultural, family, social and territorial reasons.

In this future social professionals must play a crucial role and only then they will honour their surname: SOCIAL.

1 INTRODUCTION

The main determinants of Spanish rural areas in the early twenty-first century are depopulation, the dispersion of municipalities and organisations of population, a poor communication network and the heterogeneity of the territory [1]. Taking into account these factors is essential to the planning of social policies or to undertake any activity or more specific projects. Other subjective indicators identified in several works are the typical Castilian character and inter- and intra-municipal disputes that block the development of

many projects or impede the proper functioning of some services, hindering coordination that is essential especially when resources are scarce.

The characterisation of Spain, and more specifically its rural areas, presents a number of difficulties for the government in providing basic services coverage to such a geographically dispersed population. It would be extremely difficult to provide each municipality with basic social services settled in their territory: This relates mainly to health, education and social services.

Social services in rural areas are an important subject to be investigated due to the following factors:

- Growing relevance of Social Services with input from European funds and programs.
- New effect of terms like rural development, sustainable development, new rurality, indicating a new rural emergency that must be addressed from multiple fields, including social policy.
- Lack of research on this subject.

The social, educational and health services are critical to the quality of life of the inhabitants of any region. The smallest municipalities of the Spanish countryside face greater difficulties in accessing them, mainly due to transport related issues. A good accessibility is necessary for children to attend schools located in other municipalities, for patients travelling to health centres with specialized services, or for any citizen to make an administrative procedure with the social worker. Considering the aging population in rural areas in Spain, poor transport infrastructure with reduced schedules and routes, and the inability of many elderly to scroll due to a lack of transport services or the inability to drive, we found a population for which equality of opportunities is an utopia.

Precisely one of the main objectives of social services is to promote equality of opportunities and therefore in rural areas there is a great way to go.

In this paper we try to answer certain questions related to the situation described:

- What are the main needs of Spanish rural areas today?
- Are there uniform rural areas and, therefore, can the same or similar social policies be designed throughout the country?
- Can we talk about equal opportunities in rural and urban environments in Spain?
- What role should social services play in the social sustainability of rural areas?
- What should be the lines of social intervention to improve the situation of Spanish rural areas?
- Does the rural population feel satisfied with the coverage of social services?

We are also going to delve into a particular region, Castilla y León, significant for its large geographical dispersion, its aging population and a low population density.

2 NEEDS OF RURAL AREAS IN SPAIN

In line with the idea of economic colonisation of our symbolic imagery of Bourdieu [2] and Latouche [3], the possibilities of social sustainability are closely linked to economic sustainability.

The new Law for Sustainable Development of Rural Areas from 2007 [4], pays special attention to young people, women and the elderly.

We talk about rural areas in Spain as a homogeneous context and actually it is not. We found very different rural habitats and among them scattered small municipalities in North-eastern peninsular parts and large municipalities in the South.

Following Camarero [5], we distinguish five models of rurality:

- Disconnected Rurality: Where relations between the rural populations are low and the population is aging.
- Dense Rurality: Rural areas where the population has grown rapidly with the arrival of new residents and has a social landscape that predominates the productive force.
- The Transition Rurality: Mainly in the North of the peninsula, showing some of the features of rurality decline but less depths.
- Local Rurality: Focus on the environment of Andalusia and Extremadura, showing an overview of relative demographic balance in the context of the larger nuclei and more self-sufficiency.
- Liquid Rurality: Present in Mediterranean coastal areas in the North of the Ebro valley and the Madrid region, forming a highly dynamic rural area where the heterogeneity of the social composition of the social processes are very dynamic.

A closer look to the characteristics of this typology of rural areas in Spain reveals that there are big differences between them. One important factor when seeking for adequate public politics is the context. The Spanish inhabitants, according to the various characteristics of the habitat where they live, have access to different services.

"There are two realities, one is (the) small villages (which) have no shop or sometimes both are header region where services are concentrated in the area, with less agriculture and trade. They are very different" (Cooperative representative).

Therefore, the place of residence determines the standard of living. The pragmatic evidence materialises in great detail in a study of the Argentaria Foundation [6]. Social services, along with other organisations and institutions must undertake measures to promote equal opportunities for all citizens, with special attention to the most disadvantaged by personal, economic, cultural, social, territorial and family reasons.

3 RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

3.1 The answers of social services

In Spain there is a structural difference between urban and rural basic social services. They have separate units, while the former depend on the municipalities; the latter depend on the provincial councils. Social policies and rural development are not designed globally but sectorial interventions have been made and there has been no feedback.

The term public policy comes from Polis (city) and shows that from its beginnings it was designed for cities. The urban centre shows a restrictive policy with urban focus, and today the development of social service coverage still meets typically urban designs. In rural areas it is necessary to adapt to the needs and characteristics of this context.

Importantly, some of the social needs are covered by the associations and non-profit organizations both in rural and urban habitats. However, the Spanish countryside has a less associative movement, relational greater poverty and a lower social participation by environmental constraints. For example, a person with disabilities living in a rural area is subject to multi-exclusion, first by the disability and secondly by residing in a rural area. These two factors are not added but multiplied since the interaction with the environment is

further complicated by structural barriers. Also access to basic social goods like health, education, employment, housing, transportation, social services, leisure etc. is more complicated than in urban areas.

- Social sustainability has three major threats in rural areas [5]:
- Demographic Imbalances
- Gender inequalities
- Differences in access to mobility

These three elements are interrelated and representing a great social and political challenge. Social services should contribute to social sustainability and implement public policies to eliminate these barriers. The interviews show that many of the interventions are limited to individual and specific attention and more related to bureaucratic interventions than to structural issues.

Many studies provide guidance on the importance of social sustainability for the future of rural areas, then, is necessary to work on these three threats described. Social services can (and should) help to mitigate these threats, but their protocols and the territorial coverage impede involvement in actions to improve the demographic imbalances and increase mobility difficulties (many users must travel dozens of kilometres to access social services). In contrast, most other interventions aimed at reducing gender inequalities. Therefore, we can conclude that rural citizens face a tripod that hinders social sustainability and social services do not contribute enough to promote social sustainability.

The depopulation is closely linked to the difficulties of access to employment with suitable characteristics, but also the lack of services for quality of life, preventing equal opportunities between rural and urban, which affects so differential women [7].

As a result, rural citizens, in addition to the structural problems, have social services which instead of promoting equal opportunities, in some respects, impede them:

"The much hyped equal opportunities remain a panacea for people in small towns in Castilla y León. The almighty (at least theoretically) welfare state has shown over time that its bases were cracked and expectations of universal coverage have been impossible to meet" [8].

3.2 The case of Castilla y León

We present research data from Castilla y León (which corresponds to the model of Disconnected Rurality).

For the implementation of the study we relied on a qualitative methodology: Eleven in-depth interviews and two focus groups were carried out. Interviews were conducted with four rural CEAS professionals (social workers and community cheerleaders), two social workers (one law degree without training of Social Work) of the MEC (Educative Team Psicopedagogy) and five social workers from Health Centres in the province.

Before offering some of the results we will make a brief demographic description of this region. While municipalities with less than 2000 inhabitants have grown in Spain since 2000, Castilla y León has lost population. Smaller towns grow less than the average for its size, in a situation of double retirement: The public policy responds to the citizenship with a decision to leave the smaller towns, with a greater comparative disadvantage for women and the youth.

The relationship between demographic recession and municipality size is clear: Villages in Castilla y León with less than 100 inhabitants are the most affected in Spain, 12% from 2000 [7].

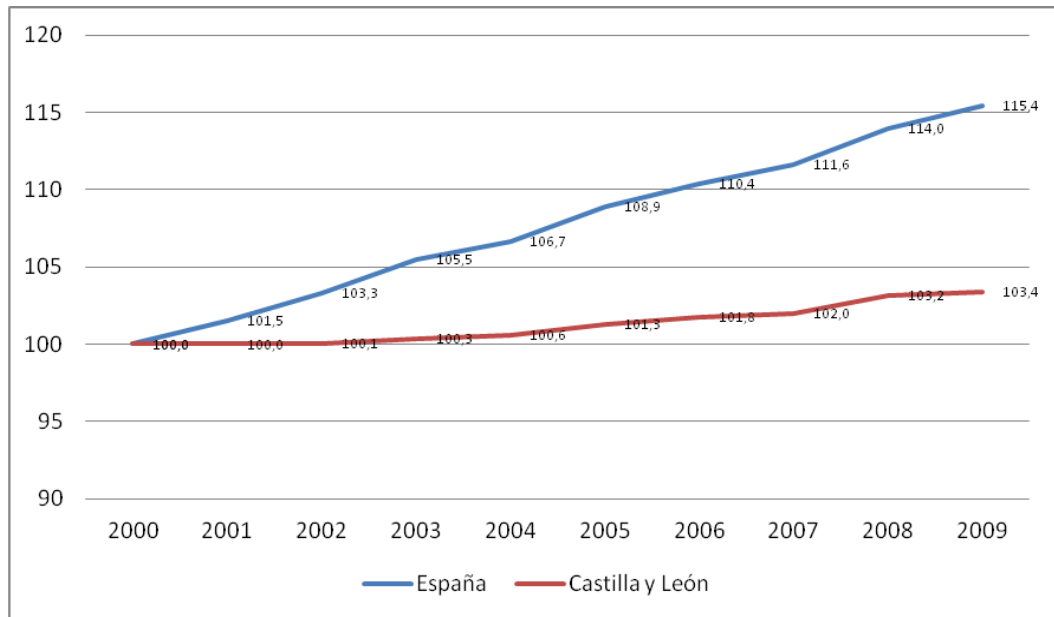


Figure 1: Evolution of the rural population in the period 2000-2009 in Spain and Castilla y León (2000 = 100) (Source: [7])

The data reflect the population of municipalities with less than 2000 inhabitants in Castilla y León has decreased by 4.0% compared to the national growth of 9.3% (s. Fig. 2). The population in rural areas increased since 2000 in thirteen regions, and reduced in Castilla y León, Extremadura, Asturias and Galicia.

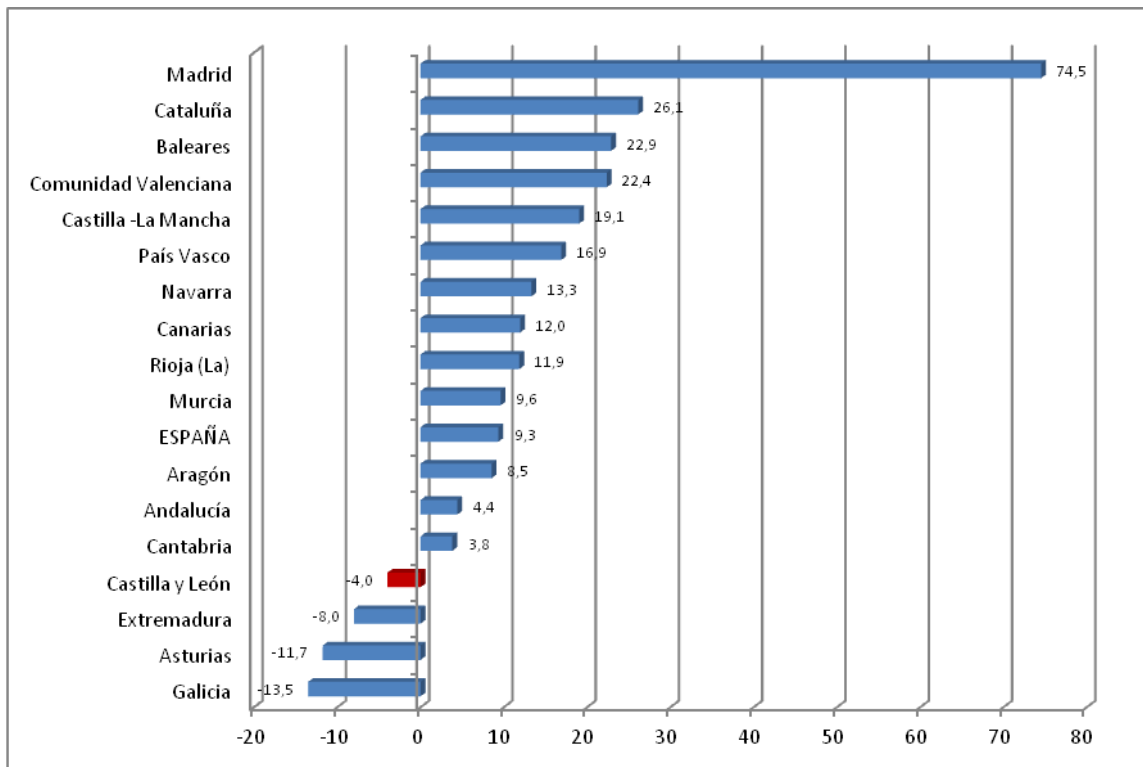


Figure 2: Population growth in the municipalities of ≤ 2.000 inhabitants according regions, 2000-2009 (Percentages) (Source: [7])

Following this contextualisation we list the results:

1. Rural citizens of Castilla y León do not feel protected by the coverage of Social Services and consider it distant due to ignorance of their functions, location and closer links with the city, especially municipalities closest to it.

2. There is an opposition between the belief of social workers that rural citizens have sufficient details about their work and their work schedules, and the forceful speech of rural inhabitants as nonusers of Social Services, who do not know these aspects.

"I know that sometimes the social worker comes to the centre, but I do not have a schedule (about the working hours), (he/she) comes when needed, but is not a lot." Doctor

"The social worker ever comes to CRA¹⁵ but (we) have little contact with her." Teacher

3. We proved a remarkable critical attitude to the social policies of the interviewed professionals and the open manifestation of their ignorance in some cases. How can someone be a social worker and not know the lines that revolve around social policies?

4. Practitioners not directly linked to the Social Services showed a much more connected and inclusive discourse than rural social workers.

5. The terminological inexactitude is very strong among the rural population of Castilla y León.

6. Lack of enthusiasm for the future of rural society on behalf of social professionals interviewed in which they should be protagonists, according to some answers they rather seem to be "spectators".

7. There is a clear contrast between the discourses of the interviewed social workers (except for social workers of EOPS), who think that rural inhabitants of Castilla y León know their schedules and functions, while the focus groups indicate the opposite.

8. There are problematic acting barriers in social work professionals: Their areas of social action are too far, lack of interagency coordination and lack of time to delve into the different areas. One example is the fact that many professionals do not know the number of municipalities covered by their scope.

9. Regarding the interdisciplinary coordination we can say that there is teamwork both in the CEAS and in the MEC (Ministry of Education) Psicopedagogy Teams and Health Centers, with the collaboration of different professionals.

10. There are some indicators that do not appear in many studies, but which can decide the success or failure of any initiative: We refer to the Castilian character which was made manifest as a brake on the two interviews and discussion groups. The main problems of this region in the early twenty-first century are depopulation, the dispersion of municipalities and organizations of population, poor communication network and the heterogeneity of its territory [9], [10].

It is fundamental and essential to know the context for planning broad social policies or any activity or project. Our research which sought to understand the perception of rural citizens of Castilla y León about Social Services, has led us to conclude that they do not have a great popularity and recognition among the population. The explanatory factors for this include the ignorance of the socio-structural context (which has been outspoken in interviews) and a lack of involvement and awareness in rural areas (reflected in the focus groups).

¹⁵ Grouped Rural School

4 CONCLUSIONS

The report shows that there are needs not covered for the Spanish inhabitants of rural areas in general and in particular needs in Castilla y León. These needs can be grouped into four groups [7]:

1. Need to define a set of quality of life indicators to measure social cohesion.
2. Maps should define the needs, resources, services and a territorial base.
3. Need for specific policies for women and young people, ensuring equal opportunities in the labour market and avoid "relocation", which is a serious loss of talent, the most valuable in the information society and employment of knowledge resources. Among such interventions should be return policies targeted to migrants and policies that promote access to housing, with a specific application in rural area.
4. Need for policies to reconcile work and family life, with special emphasis on rural areas and with comparable quality and conditions of access to urban areas.

To ensure the social sustainability of rural areas in Spain, it is necessary to design and implement public policies to promote satisfaction and the roots of the local population:

- Conquest of "quality of life" as an increasingly important objective for future generations.
- The perception of comparative advantage in relation to the urban environment, while at present the social perception of the rural population is disadvantaged.
- Mobility and quality services. In a globalised world, the distance between the demands and needs experience and the reality in rural areas is exaggerated. The dispersion of population and employment and the relocation of services require constant travel and is expensive. This issue must be addressed by public policies, both with reductions in the cost of individual mobility as well as a guarantee of public transportation systems.

Social sustainability requires the construction of dynamic social networks to strengthen the social and economic fabric of the territories. We must promote complementarity between rural and urban areas. The local and the global overlap, resulting in a new space: The glocal [11].

The rural world unfolds between proximity and remoteness. Local services and care for older people, representing two core areas of intervention, have acquired a clear priority. This will fulfil the objectives of the Law of Personal Autonomy and Care for Dependency and loneliness and social isolation, key facts in the social exclusion of rural citizens. Proximity is treated in two ways: As a direct care for people, and thus close and adequate to everyday contexts, and as a tool to support the retention and fixation of the population in its usual environment, promoting independence in daily activities and social integration, which undoubtedly leads to an improved quality of life. Our research shows that this proximity of social services is not perceived by rural residents.

One consideration: You cannot simply apply the organisational patterns of urban services to rural areas, where the features should be: The integration of sectorial policies, the multifunctionality of resources and mainstream projects.

Finally we propose a series of lines of intervention that will undoubtedly improve the coverage of rural people with social services in Castilla y León and Spain:

- Reduction of social action areas.
- Support for the organisation of regional institutional fabric.
- Support for the organisation of local social fabric.
- Campaigns for the attraction and integration of immigrants (job boards).
- Local development programs and promotion of new employment.

- Greater involvement of social professionals to rural areas that must necessarily pass through knowledge of the pillars on which it is based.
- Coordination among institutions to leverage all available resources and not superimpose performances.
- Matching the territorial division of the areas of CEAS, the MEC Psycho Equipments, NIHM professionals, commonwealths, etc..
- Increased concern of public institutions to maintain and improve the situation of rural areas through technical, political and economic support.

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