

International Immigration and Local Endogenous Development in Rural Areas: A Comparative Study of Two Left-behind Spanish Regions

In general terms, rural Spain face depopulation and ageing processes, which not only hamper local economies but also make their territory more vulnerable to natural hazards. This results in a Catch-22 situation in which the older population may not continue with their previous economic activities, while no new activities are created because of the emigration of young people. Although some studies have seen the potential of international immigrants for preventing (or at least slowing down) depopulation (Berthomière et al., 2019; Camarero and Sampedro, 2019; Tulla, 2019), in general terms immigration has not been perceived as a means for promoting local development in rural areas. Indeed, until recently, migration and mobility have been scarcely researched phenomena in European rural studies (e.g. Bayona-i-Carrasco and Gil-Alonso, 2013; Mendoza, 2023).

This paper studies the role of international immigration in supporting local economies, bringing in new ideas on sustainability and revitalising the social fabric of rural municipalities in two left-behind areas, Ribagorza, in the Spanish Pyrenees, and Sayago, in the Spanish-Portuguese border, two areas with contrasting economic structures and different population dynamics. In line with the RE-PLACE project, a Horizon Europe Framework Programme, and ELDEMOR objectives, a Spanish-funded project, the paper helps identify major economic opportunities for innovative companies and therefore contribute to the Union's competitiveness and employment in rural settings.

The specific objectives of the paper are as follows: (i) characterize the demographic dynamics of the study areas, particularly the migration processes that have emerged in recent years; (ii) analyze the impact of mobility and migration on the economic and social structures of these regions; (iii) assess and contrast the role of international immigrants' capitals in fostering local development, both economically and socially, in the two study areas; (iv) recognize entrepreneurial initiatives undertaken by immigrants, in order to assess the impact of these initiatives' economic activities driven by immigrants; and (v) evaluate comparatively the influence of the territory, particularly the local institutional framework, in shaping economic and social initiatives (e.g., entrepreneurial efforts, immigration policies).

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

Traditional rural-urban movements have long been complemented by urban-rural flows in Europe (i.e. "counter-urbanisation"). As seen through the lens of counter-urbanisation, rural immigration has been explained through concepts like "neo-rural migration" and "lifestyle migration", and it has mainly been analysed as a form of internal migration. However, international migration movements towards rural areas are increasingly present in Europe. The literature has identified two main flows of international immigrants: Retirement migration (primarily retired nationals from Northern and Central Europe heading to Southern European nations) and labour/economic migration (mainly migrants from developing countries reaching European rural areas in search of job opportunities, driven by the demand for workers in farming and caregiving).

In the case of Southern European rural areas, international labour migration is particularly relevant for farming activities (Rye and Scott, 2018). These are countries that have highly segmented labour markets and an extensive family-based informal economy, in which agriculture has been one of the economic activities attracting international immigrants. Immigrants' role in Southern European rural areas go beyond agriculture, however, as they are also involved in other economic activities such as construction and caring for elderly populations.

As for international retirement migration, the literature has long pointed out the preference of Northern and Central European retirees for destinations in Southern Europe, such as coastal areas with a benign climate and a history of seaside tourism (e.g. the Spanish Canary Islands, the Portuguese Algarve), and the rural “idyllic” setting of beautiful countryside with a supposedly laid-back lifestyle, e.g. west and south France, Italian Tuscany (Mendoza et al., 2024; Romagosa et al., 2020; King et al., 2019). This migration has been potentiated by an increase in geographic mobility, longer healthy lifespans, and more people pursuing active lifestyles through migration to countries perceived as scenically, climatically, and culturally attractive.

From a demographic standpoint, immigrants have certainly made it possible to reduce or, in some cases, even reverse rural depopulation and ageing processes, but this has been unequal in Southern Europe. In other words, while some rural areas present a sluggish labour market and limited capacity to absorb some kinds of immigrants, other territories are better prepared to receive immigrants to prevent depopulation and ageing. A demographic and spatial dichotomy seems to have emerged between the more expansive and the less developed rural areas, which we intend to analyse in Spain comparing two study areas. The existing literature usually fails to address this contrasting situation in rural areas in Southern Europe, and comparative studies are a minority among rural studies.

The emphasis on specific types of immigration in rural areas like the aforementioned ones has overlooked other types of incomers, such as professionals (e.g. doctors and nurses), lifestyle movers, immigrant entrepreneurs and self-employed workers who may potentially have positive impacts on local economies. This presentation is also based on the fact that while immigrants have been shown to fill gaps in rural labour markets, their potential to contribute to economic local development with their skills, training, international connections and, at times, their entrepreneurship is only beginning to be understood.

In this regard, the neo-endogenous development approach seems to be the best theoretical paradigm to comprehend local development dynamics in rural settings. It builds on the principles of endogenous development, which emphasizes local control, resources, and capacities (Ploeg and Marsden, 2008; Vázquez-Barquero and Rodríguez-Cohard, 2016), but, differently from the endogenous approach, the neo-endogenous perspective integrates external connections and influences to foster sustainable development. Therefore, economic growth is viewed not in isolation but in connection with external forces, emphasizing the pivotal role of effective networks in establishing extra-local connectivity, as key features of neo-endogenous development (Ray, 2006; Gkartzios and Lowe, 2019). By combining local empowerment with strategic external linkages, neo-endogenous development theory offers a nuanced and balanced approach to local development, and it addresses the limitations of traditional endogenous development and top-down approaches (Marango et al., 2021).

RESEARCH METHODS

This paper compares patterns of international immigration and local development in two study areas in Spain. The material this paper is based on comes from three projects that share similar objectives and methodology. The first one is SURDIM, a European-funded project which researched international immigration in the Pyrenees (Ribagorza data comes from it), the second is an Spanish-based project on left-behind areas in Portugal and Spain (ELDEMOR) and the third is an on-going European project on left-behind regions in the European Union (RE-PLACE). Sayago data comes from these two projects.

Despite differences in scope and length, the three share a quantitative analysis (based on Census and official data), and qualitative analysis which is based on in-depth interviews with key informants and immigrants. RE-PLACE project though implemented a five-country survey in order to calculate a Local Human Development Index (LHDI) (Sandu, 2022), which facilitates the differentiation of spaces by considering three dimensions at the local level: material resources, health, and socio-human capital. This analysis was focused on municipalities with populations exceeding 1,000 inhabitants. Five key indicators available in Spain were utilized in the analysis: internet access per 100 inhabitants, housing area per capita, average gas consumption per capita, income/tax ratio per inhabitant, and the standardized mortality rate. These indicators contributed to the creation of a national map, which revealed distinct geographical models.

As for the qualitative data, a total of 30 in-depth interviews with immigrants were carried out across the two designated study areas (15 in each of the counties). The selection of interviewees followed a snowball sampling technique. Initially, local public administrations and entrepreneurial associations were contacted to identify foreign-born immigrants residing in the respective areas. Subsequently, previously interviewed immigrants facilitated the referral of additional potential research participants. Gender balance was sought among the informants, even though women outnumbered men in the non-representative sample survey. Additionally, the interviewees spanned different age groups, leading to a wide spectrum of labour integration experiences among immigrants, with an average age of 49. Of the non-representative survey, nearly two-thirds consisted of entrepreneurs and self-employed workers. In the case of Ribagorza, the majority of these individuals were originally from Central and Western Europe, with a smaller portion originating from Latin America. For Sayago, entrepreneurs were equally distributed between internal and international immigrants. The immigrants' insights were complemented by data obtained from semi-structured interviews conducted with key informants, including local mayors and representatives from business associations.

In both cases—immigrants and key informants—the average interview duration was approximately one hour, and they were conducted at a location and time convenient for the interviewee. All were recorded and transcribed in full. Participants were also assured that the data collected would be anonymized. The analysis of the interview data followed a content analysis method, which involved several stages. Initially, codes were established and organized in alignment with specific interview sections. Subsequently, utilizing the MAXQDA software, the interviews were labelled, and relevant extracts were grouped into distinct topics. Finally, a systematic review and analysis of this information facilitated the abstraction process and the selection of pertinent quotations to illustrate the analysis.

EXPECTED RESULTS

Building on previous fieldwork experiences, we selected two regions exhibiting contrasting LHDI values for further analysis. Ribagorza, located in the northern Spain, demonstrated high LHDI values, while Sayago, in the central-southern Spain, presented lower values. Following the statistical analysis, the LHDI suggests that material conditions may be primary determinants in the future development of a LBA, potentially providing a predictive tool for regional and local planning. However, fieldwork interviews highlighted certain limitations and inconsistencies within the LHDI, particularly the significant impact of political and governance-related factors, which the index does not currently account for.

Based on Census data, a first demographic analysis shows that both counties (*comarcas*) experienced similar trends concerning ageing, with the percentage of people aged 65 years old stands as high as 40,4 for Sayago. Both counties also are mainly rural, with a population highly dispersed in the territory. Yet, whereas the declining population trend in Sayago (Zamora) is clear over the last 20 years, passing from 9.775 in 2001 to 6.986 in 2021 (yet in Ribagorza, Huesca, this trend shows some population recovery). In the period 2001-2011, the annual growth for the Huesca county was positive (1% annual), even if this trend reversed in the subsequent decade. In any case, population has slightly recovered in Ribagorza due to the arrivals of international immigrants which the foreign population representing 13,3% of the total numbers of Ribagorza (similar to the Spanish average). By contrast, foreigners only account for a scarce 4.2 in Sayago (see Table 1).

Table 1
Demography of the study areas

	Ribagorza	Sayago	Spain
Population 2001	11,792	9,775	40847371
Population 2011	13,036	8,593	46815916
Population 2021	12,422	6,986	47400798
Annual growth rate 01-11 (%)	1.0	-1.3	1.4
Annual growth rate 11-21 (%)	-0.3	-2.1	0.1
% Aged 65 and more (2021)	23.4	40.4	17.3
% Foreign population (2021)	13.3	4.2	13.5

Source: Authors from Instituto Nacional de Estadística (2024)

The first key difference between the two areas lies in the type of immigration they attract, which is crucial for understanding the variations in population dynamics. This is closely tied to the local economic foundation. Over the past two decades, rural tourism has experienced significant growth across Spain (see Soler and San Martín, 2023, on the LEADER funds for rural tourism development), while farming activities have declined. In this context, international immigrants have played an active role in fostering tourism entrepreneurship, particularly in activities like hiking and diving, in underdeveloped rural regions of Spain (Mendoza et al., 2024). This paper examines the role of international immigration in business creation, as immigrants often recognize the potential of landscapes, nature, and local culture, transforming them into sustainable and profitable ventures.

The paper also examines the role of immigrants' capitals in promoting neo-endogenous local development in the two study regions. This is approached from both an economic perspective (i.e., how immigrants contribute their skills and experience to local entrepreneurship) and a social perspective (i.e., how immigrants foster social interactions and help build economic and social networks). In particular, it investigates how social networks, grounded in trust and mutual confidence, facilitate the seamless exchange of knowledge among businesses in rural areas.

A final aspect that is analysed in the presentation is the institutional framework which seems to be crucial to understand differences in population dynamics. This aligns with the principles of endogenous development. For instance, while Ribagorza has implemented local policies within a structured political framework supported by the regional government, Sayago lacks such support and relies more on local initiatives. An example of this is Ribagorza's active participation in a nursing training course for elderly care, addressing the needs of its aging population. Likewise, local development groups responsible for channelling EU funds into underdeveloped areas seem to be particularly active in Ribagorza.