



Authors

Ivan Čipin

Sebastian Klüsener

Joaquín Recaño

Magda Ulceluse

Editor

Emily Lines

Daniela Vono de Vilhena

A Long-Term Vision for the Development of Rural Areas in Europe

Insights from demography

Even if it is clear that there is no one-size-fits-all solution for developing rural areas, some policy needs, such as access to health care and broadband Internet, are universal. Information and communications technology (ICT) skills should also be vastly promoted.

Women in rural areas are an essential aspect for the development of these communities. Regions need to become more attractive for women in terms of employment, and social and political participation opportunities.

The future development of many rural areas is highly dependent on whether their populations are willing to accept more population diversity, e.g. as a result of in-migration. Policy-making can help foster social contact between the native population and newcomers.

Communities and local governments should provide more opportunities for all residents to be involved in the decision-making process. This gives them the chance to shape their towns and to create a sense of belonging.

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Introduction

European rural areas are very heterogeneous. While some have good population development prospects, many are actually experiencing population decline. These decline processes are in part long-standing and have many economic and social causes. Of key importance is that not all rural areas are equally attractive for young adults and families, and mostly tend to lose such (sub)groups due to out-migration. Population decline in rural areas has recently gained importance on the European Union's (EU) agenda and is currently among the priorities related to demographic change for the Vice-President for Democracy and Demography of the European Commission. A previous Population Europe policy brief provided recommendations on how rural areas can respond to these population changes while offering a good quality of life (Lines, 2020). In this current policy brief, eminent demography scholars present key insights from the discipline, aiming to contribute to the current debates on the future of rural areas in Europe.

Towards a demographic typology of rural spaces

What happens in rural areas with shrinking populations? One prominent demographic issue is the considerable and persistent imbalance between men and women as the migration balances are often more negative (more people leaving than arriving) for young women than for young men (Sander, 2014). Rural areas tend to offer more and better employment opportunities for men than women (Klüsener, 2006), prompting the latter to leave and the former to struggle to find a partner and form a family. Moreover, the negative migration balances in rural areas have a negative long-term impact on birth rates, and contribute to an increasing educational gap between rural and urban areas. Consequently, rural areas facing population decline often end up with an older age structure, and a higher proportion of working-age men in comparison to women and a higher proportion of low-educated individuals.

How can we account for the heterogeneity of rural areas across Europe? Is it possible to group these spaces based on specific characteristics? Joaquin Recaño (Centre for Demographic Studies / Autonomous University of Barcelona) proposed a demographic typology of rural spaces based on a factor analysis of Spanish data (Recaño, 2017).

The first group are towns referred to as **demographically**

resilient spaces. These are entities of larger size with a certain demographic stability, at a lower altitude and located on the edge of Spain's central plateau. The population densities are higher than the rural average and the sex ratio (ratio of males to females in a population) is slightly greater than for Spain as a whole. The impact of emigration has been less important, and only 60% of people born in these towns resided in a different town in 2016. The second group – **rural spaces of emigration** – are at a high altitude, have a small number of inhabitants and low population density, negative growth rates, a significantly higher sex ratio than the first group, a relative high level of ageing, are majorly impacted by emigration, and 80% of people born in these towns now reside in other municipalities. Finally, the third group consists of **rural spaces at risk of irreversible depopulation**, with characteristics at the extreme end of the scale: maximum altitude, very small number of inhabitants, population density averaging 4.3 inhabitants per km² and maximum ageing with average ages close to 60. These municipalities have experienced the highest rates of female emigration and severe ageing.

According to Recaño (2017), the second and third types of rural spaces are those whose demographic survival is at stake. In these two types, geographic isolation and poor access to public services and Internet are key factors that explain high emigration rates among young people and why these locations are unattractive for potential newcomers.

Is in-migration a solution for rural areas?

In recent years, some rural areas within the EU have experienced an increase in migration inflows. This is a result, on the one hand, of labour immigration from eastern and central Europe for work in agriculture, forestry, construction and domestic care (Bock, Osti and Ventura, 2016). On the other hand, it also reflects lifestyle-related inflows of pensioners, or of middle-class individuals pursuing a (more affordable) life in rural areas while working in nearby urban centres. Newcomers can help the local economy by meeting the often high labour demand in agriculture or care, by re-opening shops and restaurants, or by paying local taxes which help sustain local services.

However, the extent of these contributions depends critically on the socio-economic and political context in their new locations. A forthcoming report by Magda Ulceluse and colleagues from the H2020 project IMAJINE shows that migration processes often reflect and reinforce exist-

ing socio-economic conditions. For instance, in-migration may cause hostile feelings among the local population, who may perceive newcomers as creating pressure on already dwindling services or representing competition for jobs. If new residents do not feel welcome, they might leave soon after arrival in search for better opportunities. Overall, while in-migration has the potential to contribute to rural areas' development and sustainability, it should not be seen as a silver bullet for all ills and should not replace broader local, national and EU-wide developmental policies.

The role of social ties

Economic resilience expressed as agriculture and animal farming, rural tourism, second homes and the existence of specific resources linked with the territory can have a positive influence on demographic developments. In addition, research also suggests that social contacts and family ties are a central element to understand population dynamics in rural areas. For example, a study of the UK found that actual contact or support exchange with family is associated with a decreased likelihood of moving away (Ermisch and Mulder, 2019). A study by Clara Mulder and colleagues (2020) on Sweden gives us further insights: When looking at young adults that have left the parental home and moved to large cities, they found that parents are actually the major attraction factor for return migration for the study population. Attachment to the region of origin or location-specific capital left behind are rarely a sufficient reason for returning.

To maintain social ties beyond family structures, results from a recent high-level policy dialogue on this topic suggest that it is important for communities to offer opportunities for residents of all ages to be involved in the decision-making process. Being able to contribute to the development of one's neighbourhood helps to establish a connection and ensures the area remains attractive for those living there (Lines, 2020).

The multiple sides of commuting

Commuting is becoming more of a reality for many Europeans and could be seen as a sign of hope to attract populations to rural areas. However, the likelihood to commute varies considerably depending on an individual's life course. According to analyses by the German Federal Institute for Population Research (BiB), one's commuting dis-

tance is strongly influenced by one's family situation. The birth of a first child marks a significant turning point: While fathers stick to their usual commuting behaviour, mothers significantly reduce the distance to their workplace as soon as they return from maternity leave. In a cross-national study, long-term experiences of daily and weekly long-distance commuting were found to be associated with lower fertility, mainly among women in Germany and Switzerland. In France and Spain, the association was either weaker or absent (Rüger and Viry, 2017).

BiB also found that while commuting brings more flexibility in choosing where one lives or works, which would in theory favour re-population processes in rural areas, it also causes stress and leaves less time for family and leisure (BiB, 2018). Whether job flexibility and the potential increase in working from home after the COVID-19 pandemic would favour permanent changes in the population structures of rural areas is still not clear because there is a lack of precise, comparative and up-to-date evidence.

Assessing the importance of digitalisation for population trends

Few studies have explored the role of access to mobile phones and high-speed Internet on population trends so far. But from a theoretical point of view, the digital revolution has the potential to have substantial implications for urban-rural differences in population trends. Over the past decades, one main reason that many rural areas experienced negative migration balances was due to the better educational and employment opportunities offered in urban areas. With new technologies, geographical distance is losing its relevance as a barrier to social interaction between individuals and groups of people. Thus, if rural areas gain similar access to these technologies as urban areas, they might gain attractiveness as places in which well-paid employment can be combined with living closer to nature.

In terms of existing findings, a major global comparison published in *PNAS* provides large-scale, national-level evidence on the positive association between mobile phone use and key sustainable development indicators. Concretely, the authors found that more access to mobile phones is associated with lower gender inequality, higher contraceptive uptake, and lower maternal and child mortality levels (Rotondi et al., 2020). In terms of fertility, a study led by Francesco Billari (Bocconi University, Billari et al., 2019) based on German data suggests that increasing access to high-speed Internet may promote fertility among

highly educated women in advanced economies by easing the burden of balancing work and family duties. However, the study also warns that this may lead to a “second-level digital divide” in fertility, as it seems to not improve the chances for less-educated individuals, who tend to be employed in less flexible occupations.

Policy Recommendations

– Broadly speaking, there is no one-size-fits-all solution for developing rural areas. Policy interventions must consider the variety of rural spaces and local specificities. Precise evaluations are needed to identify aspects which might favour demographic and economic resilience.

– There are, however, some policy needs that are universal, such as investments in infrastructure (e.g. improved access to high-speed Internet and mobile phone services) and health care. Information and communications technology (ICT) skills should be vastly promoted among the population.

– The presence of women in rural areas is an essential aspect for the development of these communities. This implies that regions need to work on becoming more attractive for women in terms of employment, and social and political participation opportunities.

– The future development of many rural areas is highly dependent on whether their populations are willing to accept more population diversity, e.g. as a result of in-migration. Policy-making can help to foster social contact between the native population and newcomers.

– Communities and local governments should provide more opportunities for residents of all ages to be involved in the decision-making process. This gives them the chance to shape their towns and to create a sense of belonging and connection. ■

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Contact: Population Europe Secretariat, Markgrafenstraße 37, 10117 Berlin, Germany

Phone: +49 (0)30 2061 383 30

Email: office@population-europe.eu

Web: www.population-europe.eu

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