

EUROPEAN SOCIOLOGICAL ASSOCIATION - RN38 MID-TERM CONFERENCE

**Sustainability, places
and social justice:
Enabling wellbeing
in rural areas
across Europe**

15-16 February
2024 Pamplona

El Sario building
Public University of Navarre



Keynote I:

Rural accessibility across Europe: Experiences and challenges

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The WHO acknowledges wellbeing (in its overlapping with health) as a human right, requiring physical, mental and social resources to achieve and maintain. Socio-ecological models highlight the role of accessibility as a cross-sectional and multi-level feature of wellbeing. Acting as a social indicator, accessibility mobilizes issues of transport justice and social inclusion. To ensure the accessibility to services and opportunities to people, no matter the place where they live and work, is also a precondition of the EU objectives of smart, sustainable and inclusive growth.

While there is rich literature on how to improve accessibility in urban contexts, the same is not true for rural areas, especially when considering the concept of accessibility in its broadest sense and not only as a measure of travelling time from one centre to another.

This gap is problematic, if one considers that most low-density, peripheral rural settlements suffer from accessibility and mobility problems that challenge their liveability and potential for development. The low density of settlements, the scattered demand and the large distance from the centres where services of general interest are located are all typical features of these areas, which often struggle to invert the decline loop they have been trapped into, also as a consequence of the increasingly urban-centric approach that has characterised policy-making at all levels in the last decades. In these contexts, the concept of “immobility as a right” takes on connotations and implications that go well beyond the transport component, and the equity impacts of car dependence are particularly relevant.

Beyond mobility-centred approaches, a wider perspective is needed to understand and address these challenges, embracing the societal, economic and spatial components and implications of accessibility. For instance, besides independent individual mobility, accessibility needs are fulfilled also through “communities of practice” sharing accessibility concerns and activating collaborative responses. Traditional accessibility assessments and policies do not consider this aspect and often fail, as they overlook the multilayer nature of accessibility and lack understanding of accessibility needs.

Acknowledging the above, this contribution reflects on accessibility in rural areas across Europe. Some insights from the book *Rural Accessibility in European Regions* are presented, and suggestions for a research agenda are proposed.

Keynote II:

Revisiting the ‘post-productivist countryside’ in challenging times: A 2024 assessment

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At least since rural social science consolidated itself from around the 1980s, a range of researchers from across the global North have sought to model the geography of its countryside, whilst also trying to capture how this has changed and continues to evolve over time. One influential perspective in this respect has utilised the concept of the ‘post-productivist countryside’, a term especially associated initially with the influential Marsden-Murdoch led rural research in the UK. Indeed, the present author adopted this terminology in many of his rural publications, albeit delineating it in a different way. This paper will revisit this work in the context of a number of recent and largely still ongoing ‘challenges’ that much of the global North rural is experiencing. After reiterating the post-productivist model and introducing these challenges, the paper will reflect on how each of the elements of the adopted post-productivist rural model are being impacted by them. Overall, the desire is to reflect on whether a model for rurality circa the 1990s is still appropriate in 2024, and also what is felt about the emergence of, for example, novel ideas such as a neo-productivist rural that have been suggested for today.

Migration and social diversity

Variegated migrations in UNESCO vineyards: Diversity, place-making and inequalities in Southern Piedmont rural areas (Italy)

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Over the last three decades, different migratory phenomena have taken place in the vineyard areas of Southern Piedmont (North-western Italy), a territory internationally renowned for the production of prestigious wines and whose wine-growing landscapes were awarded the UNESCO World Heritage status in 2014.

Since the 1990s, foreign workers from Eastern Europe and the Balkan area have progressively replaced the previous domestic labour force. In particular, migrants from the Republic of North Macedonia have assumed a crucial role: they have entered into the viticulture labour market by responding to a shortage of manpower, becoming indispensable for the development of local economy, and, at the same time, they have here created a large and articulated community. As a stable new population but they have also come to play a fundamental role of mediation, informally regulating the flows of temporary migrants, i.e. compatriots arriving each year as seasonal workers. More recently, the same rural context, also thanks to public strategies to promote the area as attractive and to boost its tourist vocation, has become a destination for other types of mobilities and migrations. In particular, an increased number of people from Western/Northern European countries (Norway, Sweden, Netherlands) has been recently recorded and their presence in the territory seems to combine elements of amenity migration and multi-local dwelling.

This proposal, relying on empirical documentation collected by the authors through interviews over the last 10 years, intends to explore this novel kind of (super) diversity, investigating its local and translocal geography, features and interactions (if any). Moreover, it intends to question forms and processes of emerging symbolic and material inequalities, different place-making processes and the role diversity may play in elaborating and negotiating development perspectives for the rural areas under analysis.

Shaping rural cosmopolitanism

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The arrival of new residents in rural areas has been of great interest to scholars of rural change for several decades. The study of this influx of new residents can highlight various nuances: pro-rural migration, (pre)retirement migration, back-to-the-land migration, neo-rural migration, lifestyle migration, amenity migration, transnational migration, and so on.

On this occasion, we focus on the growing number of new residents of foreign origin in rural

areas. In recent years, this group has become a key population for the social sustainability of certain rural regions. On the one hand, as an essential labour force in agriculture, care, and services. On the other hand, they play an essential role in the transformation of rural communities, as they represent a key element of their social and economic fabric. However, despite the relevance of the foreign population for the future of the rural areas, their situation is largely identified with what has come to be defined as precarious rural cosmopolitanism. Thus, in contrast to the classical (and limited) image of a cosmopolitanism with romantic evocations and important symbolic and cultural components, the expression of rural cosmopolitanism directs our attention to points of friction, to the (im)permeability of rural communities to include social diversity, to the different access of local and foreign populations to welfare services, and so on.

The discussion presented here is based on the case study of the Valdorba region, the characterisation of its population of foreign origin through the use of census data and the narrative expressed in a series of in-depth interviews with people of foreign origin and experts.

Conceptualising the aspirations and socio-spatial trajectories of migrants in rural Greece

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The integration of migrants into the labour market and the employment characteristics and living conditions in rural areas are the subject of a growing body of research in Greece. In this context, the employment conditions of migrants in rural areas, their livelihoods and the impact of migrants' work in rural areas have been at the centre of discussions. However, the study of the different social and spatial trajectories of migrants in rural Greece remains much under-researched.

Methodologically, the paper draws on empirical research conducted between 2017 and 2022 with 30 migrants living in villages and small towns in the Western Greece region at two-time intervals. Through the biographical and life stories of Albanians, Romanians and Bangladeshis, this paper takes an in-depth look at their changing aspirations and expectations over the course of their lives, as well as their socio-spatial trajectories. The paper offers an analysis of the lived experiences of migrants in rural Greece. It explores the material and non-material dimensions of migrants' assessment of their social position and presents their individual and family strategies and practises for improving their social position in rural areas, both in relation to their place of origin and the social group to which they feel they belong to, and over the course of their journey.

The migrants' narratives reveal different kinds of comparisons they make across spatial and temporal scales, between their social position in their country of origin and in rural Greece, and in relation to other social groups, which highlights the relational dimension of their subjective assessments of their life trajectories.

‘We are here our hearts are there’: Rurality, ethnicity and belonging

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The notion of the rural idyll is well recognised within scholarship. Allied to this imaginary is that rural areas comprise white and homogenous space; with socially conservative values that are exclusionary. In recent decades, studies have identified the arrival of migrants into so-called New Immigration Destinations, rural spaces with little contemporary experience of immigration, often bringing with them a sense of cosmopolitanism. This research has challenged this prevailing discourse of a fully exclusive rural space, identifying incidents of hospitality, conviviality, and everyday cosmopolitanism. These acts are often performed in everyday spaces to help create a sense of belonging for new arrivals.

Migrants’ sense of belonging to a place is often taken as an indicator of their integration into society. Research has shown that belonging is more than a term used to describe an attachment to place, it also relates to the politics (of belonging) and to notions of identity. This paper uses the specificity of place to examine the intersection of belonging, rurality and ethnicity. Drawing on participatory walks with diverse migrants along Hadrian’s Wall in the North of England (celebrating 1900-year anniversary), we explore the significance of walking as a tool to engage with forced refugees. We do so through the dual perspectives of an art practitioner and a sociologist. The project included collective walks, creative artist lead learning workshops which lead into a creation of a performative protest walk and a public facing art exhibition. The act of walking together blurs boundaries arising from individual status or position, creating a bond from doing a shared activity enabling conversation and friendships to emerge. Through collective walking we explore the barriers refugees and those in the asylum seeking system face in the rural space; and we show how belonging is emotional and relational. Emotional connections can become powerful tools for survival especially in a cruel immigration system that dehumanises and fails to recognise individuals for who they really are.

Transforming and hybridising rural space: Migrations, belonging and subjectivities

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There is a relational understanding of rural space that allows rural places to reconstitute, negotiate, and hybridise. At the same time, there are connections, partnerships, and antagonisms between rural and urban areas that need to be acknowledged and considered. Rural places can be viewed from different angles: a) as transformative mobilities associated with migrants’ aspirations and practices related to their well-being; b) as multiple place attachments of people living/economically active in rural areas; and c) as hybridization of places related to the subjective understandings of different groups and their interactions. In this context, non-relational aspects such as the unintended consequences of human actions, parochial aspects of rural areas, and people’s subjectivities can also be included.

This paper explores the transformation and hybridisation of rural places and spaces based on the complexities of migrations, belonging, and subjectivities. One vehicle for our discussion is migrants’ narratives of their trajectories and how they have pursued their well-being, compiling their experiences and memories of their efforts around their "lessons learned," "achievements,"

and "gains," which in turn paint a colorful picture of their subjective positioning. Moreover, we seek to distinguish between "ways of being" and "ways of belonging" (Levitt and Glick Schiller) for migrants and non-migrants, recognising that there are dynamics between situations of settlement and situations of mobility. Empirical evidence comes from recent research in rural Greece that includes qualitative research among native and non-native populations. We would like to propose a more nuanced approach to migrant well-being in rural areas by emphasising the role of theory, placing migrancy at the centre of our discussion, and doing justice to migrants themselves.

Agriculture and food system (I)

A spatial analysis of social economy organisations and their impact on sustainable development in Irish rural areas

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Social and solidarity economy organisations have recently been brought to the fore by international institutions including the European Commission, the OECD and the United Nations as agents contributing to address complex challenges such as climate change, ageing population, depopulation and loss of basic services in some rural areas and lack of access to employment for vulnerable groups (European Commission, 2021; OECD, 2022, United Nations, 2023). The potential of these organisations lies in their combination of social and/or environmental aims with an economic activity and democratic decision-making (Defourny and Nyssens, 2017).

Despite in recent years the literature on rural social economy organisations have grown substantially (Bock, 2019; Steiner et al. 2019; van Twuijver et al., 2020; Olmedo et al., 2023) little is known about to what extent they contribute to sustainable development in rural areas. Drawing from recently collected quantitative data on social economy organisations in Ireland, first, we conduct using Geographical Information Systems software (QGIS), a spatial analysis of the characteristics and distribution of social economy organisations against a six-tier rural-urban typology developed by Central Statistics Office-Ireland (CSO, 2019). Second, we develop a sustainable development composite index (Fernández-Martínez et al., 2020) that incorporates economic, social and environmental indicators at local and regional levels. We then test the association between social economy organisations and sustainable development. Our geographically sensitive analysis of Irish social economy organisations provides nuanced information on the scale and contribution of these social economy organisations to the development of accessible, intermediate and remote rural areas within Ireland. This information can be further used to provide a realistic picture of the impact of social enterprises to the sustainable development of rural areas.

Family farm succession and agroecology transitions: A case study in Castilla y León, Spain

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The generational renewal in family farms represents a pressing challenge for the sustainability of the family farming model, and agriculture more broadly. Consequently, exhaustive research has examined the dynamics and factors conducive to a blueprint family succession, and specific policy instruments have been designed accordingly. However, fewer studies have investigated whether and how farm succession stimulates more sustainable farming. Drawing on farm

succession literature and applying an agroecology lens to farm sustainability, this paper investigates how family succession shaped the farming strategies of young farmers in a western-central region of Spain. Data was collected using life history interviewing techniques and analyzed combining inductive and deductive qualitative methods. Young farmers who experienced a blueprint succession were found likely to continue with – and intensify – the conventional farming strategies of their parents, assisted by farmer unions, public training, and CAP incentives. Agroecological strategies appeared associated to successors who took over the family farm after long disruptions in the succession process. The later considered agroecology the most sustainable and cost-effective strategy to reinvigorate the obsolete farms they received. However, they navigated a convulsed agroecology transition during their first years as farmers, counting on scarce training, and limited help from their families, neighbors, unions, and CAP incentives for generational renewal. These findings suggest that family farm sustainability should not be taken for granted with the generational renewal. Instead, further research is needed to understand the synergies and trade-offs involved in the adoption of sustainable succession strategies, including the impacts of generational renewal policies.

The impact of CCIs on rural socioeconomic transformation in Europe: A theoretical and empirical framework

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This research delves into the transformative role of Cultural and Creative Industries (CCIs) in rural Europe, presenting an original theoretical and empirical framework. It is an exploratory study that focuses on developing a comprehensive approach to understand and analyse the impact of CCIs on the socioeconomic fabric of rural areas.

Central to this study is the exploration of how digital technologies and artistic creation, supported by targeted policy interventions, can bolster the growth and integration of CCIs in rural settings. This investigation is particularly pertinent given the ongoing demographic and economic challenges faced by these areas. The research spotlights the interconnectedness of contemporary art, cultural heritage, and the rural social economy, emphasizing how these elements can be harmonized to foster community resilience and vitality.

A significant aspect of this study is the incorporation of best practices in deploying CCIs as instruments of rural development. By examining case studies and success stories across Europe, the research aims to identify effective strategies that have revitalized rural economies and communities through CCIs. These examples serve as a guide for policymakers and practitioners, illustrating the potential of CCIs in transforming rural areas into hubs of cultural and economic activity.

Ultimately, this research contributes to a broader discourse on rural development in Europe. It underscores the need for policies and practices that are attuned to the unique characteristics and aspirations of rural communities, advocating for a balanced approach that bridges rural-urban divides and promotes spatial and social justice. The study presents a forward-thinking perspective on the role of CCIs in shaping a sustainable and equitable future for rural Europe.

Food and commercial deterioration in remote rural places. Notes to research in Europe

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The proposal carries out a study on the identification of food inequalities in rural territories with problems of commercial deterioration. It reviews the most widely used theoretical and methodological approaches for their study at an international level: food deserts and food access. Thus, it describes what food deserts are, how they have been empirically delimited to investigate the causality between food commercial availability and the diet. Furthermore, problems of methodological rigidity in the use of food deserts are detailed, trying to account, only, the commercial density of a territory. The author is committed to continuing research under the food deserts approach, but using, in addition, the food access approach, which seeks not only to describe situations of commercial deficiencies, but also to understand the dynamics of food acquisition in a territory in a more complete way.

Care and well-being

Barriers for rural older adults to access health care services: A qualitative study

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The share of the rural population in Turkey, which has been gradually decreasing due to rural to urban migration and external migration since 1960s, dropped to 17.3% in 2022. Owing to the demographic change caused by migration, the proportion of the elderly population living in rural areas has increased. Due to demographic, economic and social transformation, rural areas have received less public investment than urban areas. This situation has led to inadequate health services in rural areas, both in terms of quantity and quality. This is a significant problem for the growing number of elderly people in rural areas that need to access to health services. Even primary health care services in rural areas, which are most accessible to older adults, are understaffed and lack specialists. This leaves the elderly with poorer access to the health services regarding proximity, quality and affordability. This study aims to understand how rural older adults perceived their access to health services, the barriers they experience when they trying to access services, and how they try to overcome the barriers they do encounter. Qualitative data were collected from 13 participants aged 65 and above living in rural areas of the provinces of Afyon and Antalya through observation and in-depth interviews. Preliminary research indicates that older people perceive their health to be poor and therefore require more health services. They complain about not being able to get the treatments they need from primary care and difficulties accessing medicines. They usually have to go to hospitals in the city center to get the treatment they need, but it is a challenge for them to travel the long distance using public transport. Not having a regular income or having a low pension is a barrier for older adults to access health services.

E-health attitudes in rural areas. A study case in a remote rural area of Valencia region

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Access to services in rural areas exposes a significant gap, with health services emerging as a critical domain where additional disparities intersect. Factors such as mobility, housing, professional opportunities, and urban-centric processes contribute to the challenges faced by rural health services.

This communication delves into the attitudes of the rural population concerning future e-health services. It not only explores the current landscape but also outlines these attitudes for a future experimental pilot in a remote rural area in the Valencian region, specifically in Els Ports County—one of the less populated areas in this region. Inequalities across various public services, exacerbated by decades of socioeconomic decline, manifest as a lack of dynamism in

remote villages. The four municipalities selected for this pre-pilot analysis have populations ranging from 20 to 179 inhabitants.

Qualitative methods were employed to capture the discourses of both the population and health professionals. The results reveal a spectrum of attitudes, ranging from open welcome to e-health technologies to concerns that it might serve as a pretext for additional health budget cuts. Health professionals express receptivity toward future e-health processes, viewing them as a complementary resource in circumstances that warrant such engagement.

A crucial factor also identified in the research process is the confidence placed in health professionals, translating to confidence in future enhanced changes guided by them.

Fostering the community approach as a tool to re-define long-term care strategies in rural areas: Gingko, a project aiming to prevent loneliness among elderly people

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The confluence of the processes of depopulation, ageing and masculinisation experienced by rural areas poses the challenge of redefining the type of social intervention offered by social and health services in general, and in particular, the redefinition of a comprehensive care model that takes into account the specific socio-demographic and gender context of rural areas. In this sense, the community approach is a fundamental tool to redefine such a model taking into account its potential to be deployed in proximity environments such as rural areas.

The "Gingko" project is an educational and research project whose general objective is to prevent the isolation of elderly people in rural areas. This project, funded by the Erasmus+ teaching innovation call, which will be implemented between 2023-2024, involves academic institutions, social services, NGOs and public institutions from the three participating countries: Italy, France and Spain. In the case of Spain, the project is being developed in Navarre, with the participation of the Public University of Navarre, as a training and research centre, as well as the Community of Social Services of Bortziriak (Arantza, Bera, Etxalar, Igantzi and Lesaka) as an environment of social intervention. The aim of this communication is to present the intervention approach of this project oriented to prevent the isolation of the elderly people in the territories by incorporating the community and intergenerational approach in the intervention processes. The project expects three parallel results: 1) the design of training materials for the prevention of isolation of elderly people living in Bortziriak, 2) to make visible the contributions of the community approach in the redefinition of programmes for the prevention of isolation and 3) to promote collaboration networks in rural environments that allow the coordination of services and actions between different agents.

Disentangling the “social dimension” of wellbeing in rural and peripheral welcoming communities across Spain and Italy

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To address the so-called demographic challenge in Spain and Italy, top-down solutions based on generalistic economic indicators were implemented in peripheralized rural areas, with modest results. However, certain proactive local communities developed practical strategies for the survival of their territories, which led to the emergence of welcoming initiatives that aimed at socioeconomic revitalization by engaging with inhabitants from migrant backgrounds, either permanently or cyclically. This contribution emphasizes the often-overlooked "social dimension" by analyzing social capital and infrastructure, access to services and housing, homemaking processes, and the relationship with the natural environment around the Spanish and Italian Peninsulas. These 14 case studies contribute to unravelling the implications of social well-being in rural areas, enabling a critical study of arrival frameworks and arguing about settlement, inequalities, and sustainability. Based on intensive fieldwork following eminently qualitative methodology, including semi-structured interviews, participant observations, and focus groups, we build on the conformation of "social territories." This framework is understood as the one where the elements related to the social well-being of all the inhabitants of a given territory are structured, ultimately influencing the emplacement of people in a given community. This research is framed under the H2020-funded research programme Welcoming Spaces Investing in 'Welcoming Spaces' in Europe: revitalising shrinking areas by hosting non-EU migrants (H2020-SC6-Migration-2019-870952)

Demographic change, well-being and sustainable development in rural areas: The case of Greece

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The undeniable ageing of Europe's rural population and the phenomenon of depopulation in remote and mountainous rural areas are two major current demographic challenges whose impact is not limited to the demographic sustainability of Europe's rural areas. These challenges are responsible for a number of social, economic, and territorial issues that not only affect the lives and well-being of older people in rural areas but also set several priorities that need to be addressed.

On the other hand, sustainable rural development has been a priority on the European Commission's agenda for more than three decades. The introduction of rural development policy as the second pillar of the Common Agricultural Policy has brought to the fore practices and measures aimed, among other things, at diversifying the rural economy and improving the quality of life in rural areas. Policies that aim to reduce the dependence of the local economy on agricultural activity, as well as those that promote the development of amenities and infrastructure in rural areas, are inevitably linked to, and to some extent dependent on, the demographic challenges described above. They show how the European Commission intends

to address these challenges.

Within this framework, the present contribution is based on the following points. First, to illustrate the evolution over time of the above-mentioned demographic challenges in rural areas of Greece and to examine the extent to which the demographic sustainability of these areas is at risk. Secondly, it will examine whether these challenges appear to be changing the structure of the productive fabric of rural areas and thirdly, it will examine the level of infrastructure, services and social facilities available in rural areas.

Later life care in rural areas of Turkey: Experiences of older women villagers

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There are many changes in rural areas of Turkey in many aspects such as the dissolution of traditional extended families, demographic changes such as population decline and changes in the composition of the population by age groups, mass-out migration to both abroad and urban areas, structural change in agricultural production and rural labor force, and de-ruralization has transformed later life care from traditional care to more complex structure. Nearly 10% of Turkey's total population consists of older people and approximately one-third of them reside in rural areas, and 17% of the rural population consists of people aged 65 and above. Despite rising institutional and paid home-based care for older individuals in urban areas, informal family care remains the most common pattern in Turkey, largely in rural areas. The increase in the female population as age progresses and the greater need for care in rural areas encouraged me to conduct this research. This study aims to understand how older women perceive, experience, and seek health, how to cope with illnesses and access to health care, the role of informal strategies for both health and care, how they are cared for, their relationship with family members and relatives, in brief, rural patterns of later life for older women. This study presents findings from face-to-face interviews conducted with older women in a village in Ankara. Carework seems to be a gendered/feminized routine embedded in the tension between intergenerational solidarity and traditional responsibility. It is seen that the older women go back and forth between the rural and urban areas due to the sharing of care responsibilities by children, and the desire to stay in and the dependency on their “home” in the village is observed. They encounter challenges in accessing healthcare services and often lean towards a more fatalistic approach to their health.

Environment and sustainability

Setting priorities: cattle breeding and the restoration of natural values in a Biosphere Reserve (Galicia, Spain)

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Farming traditionally aligns economic activity with the preservation of nature. This process of co-production between man and nature, relies on farming practices based on local knowledge and localized forms of governance. Case study research in the Os Ancares Biosphere Reserve in Galicia, Spain, provides insights into the socio-spatial relations of, and the control over, the local resource base. In the region, agricultural and forestry activities continue to have an important weight in terms of land-use, income provision for rural habitants and for maintaining the region's attractive characteristics for visitors. Among farmers' diverse economic activities is extensive beef cattle breeding. In Os Ancares, this is a delicate income activity. Most cattle grazes in the fields. The farms are small-scale, with an average of 20 to 60 head of mostly *Rubia Gallega*, an autochthonous cow breed, and a stocking density of between 1 and 1.5 animals per hectare. Often the small plots around farms do not provide sufficient fodder to feed the cattle, so the farmers use plots situated up to 10 kilometres away. In a first round of interviews with farmers, we aimed to identify the patterns or models of farm production, and evaluate their potential, both from an economic point of view (generation of employment and income) as well as at the environmental and territorial level (in terms of land-use and management and the provision of environmental public goods). We found that farming practices based on a traditional land-use system are grounded and congruous, but threatened with structural power relations and external domination over the environmental resources by legislative authorities, which is not inclusive to cattle breeding. Hence, farmers opt for intensifying cattle breeding, and optimize farm production based on high slaughter weight per animal. Few optimize farm economics by keeping the costs for inputs low, and limiting farm output.

The adaptive capacity to climate change of agricultural communities in rural areas - Comparing case studies from Austria, Switzerland and California

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Literature on adaptation proposes that communities and households develop adaptive capacity (AC) to minimize impacts from climate change and other potential crisis. AC is the 'capability of a system to react on exposure by withstanding or recovering.' We carried out 60 qualitative interviews in 3 case study areas with both female and male members of agricultural communities and carried out a systematic analysis studying their AC using the Community Capitals Framework (including human, social, financial, physical and natural capital as well as cultural and political capital. We specifically focused how gender aspects influence the AC within agricultural communities. We selected three case studies with focus on livestock farming according to the following criteria: Exposure to climate change, location in mountainous areas, agricultural products with certification related to grassland and rangeland farming and the

suitability to transfer knowledge between the case studies: Hay milk producing farming communities in Tyrol, Austria; Organic milk producing farming communities in Grisons, Switzerland; Organic beef producing farming communities in California, USA.

The analysis showed, that natural capital (increasing land pressure, reduced water availability) as well as financial capital (high risks, low prices for agricultural products) are important challenges for the AC of agricultural communities in general. Low supply chain integration is specifically challenging in non-certified communities. Human capital (access to knowledge and extension) as well as social capital (cooperation, exchange of information and the availability of a security net) are key when communities show a high AC. The comparison of the case study specifically showed that cultural capital (attitude towards climate change, e.g. previous experiences with droughts or even denial of climate change, role of women in livestock farming) strongly shape the AC of agricultural communities. In this regard, also identity plays a crucial role: Contradicting economic assumptions, livestock operations are continued even when they are unprofitable, due to the strong identification as farmers.

The governance of rural sustainability. The cases of Denmark and Spain in the European Union

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To achieve a general eco-social sustainability there are various mezzo scale-domains. Rural sustainability is a mezzo domain, part of the larger scale-domain of societal-territorial sustainability. This concept refers to an interdependent urban-rural area with the essential complementary sectors of agrifood, energy, mobility, water, and public and collective services, which can work as a scale for governance and policies. This usually subnational area can coincide with administrative jurisdictions, such as regions, provinces, and counties, but not in all cases. The socio-cultural conditions for an adequate working of a societal-territory sustainability area are the existence of public-civil collaboration and a regime of mixed basic-applied-experimental knowledge on ecological agriculture, which can generate substantial transformation. In rural areas, societal-territorial sustainability pivots especially upon the development of ecological agriculture.

The article compares the development of rural sustainability in two European Union countries, Denmark, and Spain, with special focus on ecological agriculture. Both countries display clearly higher indicators than EU average, but they still have scope for transformation. In Denmark, the public administrative units established in 2007 (five regions and 95 municipalities) have facilitated adequate governance and public-civil collaboration for agricultural transformation; the knowledge regime is rather developed and institutionalized; these two comparatively positive conditions, however, are not sufficient to generate an ambitious eco-social sustainability in the rural areas, given the high weight of the cattle sectors (especially dairy). In Spain, the structure of 15 politico-administratively empowered regions albeit spatially uneven, and about 40 weak provinces, have provided a minimum but limited frame for public-civil collaborative governance to foster ecological agriculture in Spanish society; the knowledge regime is dispersed with a moderate level of institutional integration, but it has reached a significant level of application; these two factors can also help understand the low domestic consumption and strong export-profile of Spain's ecological agriculture.

Living and managed forests: Their social meanings

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Depopulation and the progressive disappearance of agricultural uses in European rural territories have been increasing forest areas. However, the very decline in socio-demographic dynamism challenges forest management and rural governance. In recent years, forest fires have intensified, along with a reduction in the territory economic profitability and the loss of valuable cultural landscapes. This study is framed in the European Interreg - COMFOR-SUDOE Project (SOE4/P1/E1012) and in the project IMFLEX - Integrated Forest Management along complexity gradients (Grant PID2021-126275OB-C21 funded by MCIN/AEI/10.13039/501100011033 and by “ERDF A way of making Europe”). This work aims to analyze the social meanings attributed to the forest by local population and social actors related to forest management and its implications in socio-environmental sustainability. Two territories were chosen as cases studies: first, the Palencia Model Forest, in Castilla y León; and second, the region of La Vera, in Extremadura. This interdisciplinary research, conducted with qualitative methodology, was carried out between 2021 and 2023. *Learning Labs* and 24 semi-structured in-depth interviews were carried out. Learning Lab is a research method to foster collective learning spaces, in which participants can share, discuss and contrast their ways of thinking about the issues studied. Results have shown that two main sets of social meanings of forest emerged from participants’ discourses: the *living forest* and the *managed forest*. *Living forest* has socio-affective implications for the local population, which are related to daily activities, as well as to identities and place attachment. *Managed forest* includes meanings of forest based on management implemented by public institutions supported by instrumentally rational and scientific knowledge. In order to develop sustainable forest policies and practices, a more integral vision of the territory and a deeper understanding of both positions is necessary.

Challenges for rural policies

A tool for populists? Understanding rural well-being and voting behaviour in Turkey

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In the last decades, the rise of right-wing populist parties has been observed in many countries including Turkey. Most research on right-wing populism concentrates on the fact that the support on these parties is rooted in small towns and rural areas. Declining state subsidies, increasing competition in markets, and declining agricultural incomes have created rural resentment especially among small farmers who become dependent to agribusiness companies and bank credits. In addition, threats such as unemployment and the lack of essential services deteriorate rural well-being and cause concerns among rural dwellers. It is clear that the feeling of being discontent with the established system can be exploited by political groups which attempt to exert their own influence.

Considering the relationship between well-being and voting preferences, voting models assume that people tend to choose political parties or candidates that can improve the existing conditions. In other words, voters evaluate their macroeconomic conditions, household wealth, life satisfaction, and happiness in comparison to past and make voting decisions. Having said that, two assumptions gain prominence in the literature:

- 1- Voters tend to reward good governments and punish incompetent governments.
- 2- When well-being decreases, the support for populist parties increases.

In this study, I intend to explore rural well-being and the rural support for right-wing populist party (AKP) in Turkey on the basis of these two assumptions. The contribution will be to analyze Turkey as a case study that has been ruled by a right-wing populist party for more than two decades which has gained majority of support from small towns and rural areas in every election since 2002, despite increasing problems and polarization in the country. The data will be achieved through Turkish Statistical Institute (TUIK) Life Satisfaction Survey, World Happiness Report, UN Well-being Index, Turkish Supreme Election Council (YSK) official election results, and KONDA (Research and Consultancy) Ballot Box Analysis and Voter Profiles Report.

Women, youth, and innovation in rural areas at high risk of depopulation: The case of the LEADER programme in Aragon (2014-2020)

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According to the 174 map of Spanish municipalities subject to severe and permanent demographic disadvantages drafted by the Study Group for Spatial Planning (GEOT) of the University of Zaragoza and the SSPA network, 64.88% of Aragonese municipalities are at serious or very serious risk of depopulation. In this context, the support of innovative projects

has been established as a key tool to tackle the challenges of depopulated rural municipalities and the needs of its citizens. Since its launch, the LEADER programme, and the Local Action Groups (LAGs) have supported innovative initiatives emerging from local areas. However, is the LEADER programme able to finance innovative actions carried out by two of the groups that have traditionally faced greater difficulties in benefiting from LEADER, specifically women and young people? Based on the maximum level of disaggregation of the approved projects under the LEADER approach in the 2014-2020 programming period, it has been analysed the role of young and women people as key actors and promoters of innovative projects in shrinking rural areas. The investigation has revealed in the region of Aragon that most of the innovative initiatives have been carried out by adult men. Nevertheless, the percentage of innovative projects carried out based on the gender of the promoter shows that women, proportionally, undertake a greater number of innovative initiatives. In addition, most of the innovative initiatives have focused on the most populated areas, with women and, specifically, young women facing greater difficulty in undertaking this kind of projects in the municipalities more severely affected by depopulation.

The indirect impact of Leader in the rural municipalities of the Valencian Community

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This study has focused on examining the possible indirect effects of the Leader program in the rural municipalities of the Valencian Community that are part of Local Action Groups (hereinafter GAL). Throughout the research, the perception of the population regarding Leader grants and the presence of GAL in the Valencian rural context have been evaluated. Specific inquiries have been made about the influence of Leader grants on the population's self-esteem and the impact of GAL on the dynamization of the territory and the perception of rurality.

These fundamental issues guide the present research, which has been structured in two phases.

The first phase addresses the analysis of independent variables that could be influencing the perception of Leader. To do this, the sociodemographic situation, the modus operandi of grants in each territory, and the management model of each GAL are examined. This has been carried out through a quantitative approach that analyzes the grants awarded in the Valencian Community, a literature review for sociodemographic identification, and interviews with the management of GAL.

The second phase focuses on a qualitative analysis by conducting eleven triangular groups with key actors in the territory. These groups explore the perception about the Leader Program and GAL by the population of rural municipalities.

Among the results identified during the research, the growing importance of GAL for well-being in municipalities and the need to allocate more resources for effective dynamization stand out. Additionally, determining factors for a positive perception in municipalities, such as the presence of a permanent cultural agenda in rural areas, have been identified.

Statute of rural women in Navarra: Empowerment of rural women through gender equality public policies

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In the last decades, women situation experienced significant progress in western societies. Many feminist demands became public policies. However, gender equality is still a distant horizon. In addition to gender imbalances, rural women face the consequences of the rural-urban gap. In this context, the Navarre Institute for Equality, following the Foral Law 17/2019, of April 4 and the Strategic Plan for Equality between Women and Men in Navarre, commissioned us to elaborate a proposal of the Statute of Rural Women in Navarre. Our approach was based on two premises: first, any regulation should be grounded in an interdisciplinary contextual analysis. Secondly, it was clear to us that the drafting of the Statute must be a process of listening to rural women of Navarre and they would be its main protagonists. We understand that social research can be a strong toll for empowerment of women and its territories. Mixed Methods were applied in participatory research carried out from September 2022 to May 2023. Three focus groups were developed with rural women in different regions in Navarre. As well as a group of professionals in gender equality working in rural Navarre was invited to discuss about first results and interpretations. The results and the draft Statute were then presented to technical and policy makers from different areas of the government of Navarre. Finally, both technical report and Statute draft were presented to and discussed with a larger group of representants of women associations and local professionals in gender equality. In short, the process is important for women empowerment. Furthermore, in this way and grounded in social sciences, we are working collectively on a regulation that promotes equality between women and men in the rural areas of Navarre.

Actors and networks in rural place-based policies and initiatives in Spain and the United Kingdom. One step forward

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This study analyses different place-based policies, the roles of different actors, the horizontal and vertical connections and the innovations that they induce in rural communities. To assess the effectiveness of community-led local development (CLLD) we explore the relevance of key concepts such as community engagement and accountability, capacity-building, facilitation, and mentorship.

In the case of the LEADER approach, the most important initiative in terms of neo-endogenous rural development within the European Union, challenges relate to bureaucracy, the small amount of the grant and the complexity of getting this support to “hard-to-reach-people”.

Addressing these challenges demands new strategies at different scales of policymaking with resulting implications for the roles of key actors. Moving outside of LEADER, we analysed alternative local strategy options through semi-structured interviews and participant observation with facilitators, promoters and mentors, for different initiatives in the North of England (UTASS) and Scotland (Growbiz). This provides a basis for comparative analysis with case studies of LEADER in Andalusia.

Among the key features identified in the UK context, the commitment to mentoring among business owners; a focus on understanding and meeting local needs through the greater involvement of rural communities; covering the gaps in public and private services in remote areas, with a high social component in their actions; and investing in capacity-building for resilience and autonomy; all contributed to local development outcomes. The research revealed that as these organisations evolved, the process became central to the delivery of positive results in the long term. The community is the central point of policies and actions, and especially hard-to-reach collectives. Improving business skills and abilities is much more relevant than a mere subsidy. Finally, the key roles of the facilitators, both within their organisations and through extensive local and policy networks, were essential to advocate for local need, to engage volunteers and mentors, and to listen and respond to the needs of the communities that they serve.

Agriculture and food system (II)

How scale matters: The revival of cooperative movement in Turkey

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Over the past five years, the cooperative movement in Turkey has experienced a resurgence in popularity. During this period of re-popularisation, new forms of cooperatives have emerged and gained importance beyond the traditional forms of cooperatives. The 'agricultural sales cooperatives', which were established as part of the national development policy after the establishment of the Republic, lost power in the 2000s as a result of the neoliberal policies implemented in agriculture. These traditional forms of cooperatives, established to modernise agriculture and develop agro-industry, lost power and were replaced by "agricultural development cooperatives" established at village and district level. By comparing traditional and new forms of cooperative models and their business objectives, this study aims to present a critical analysis of the notion of 'scale' as a volume of production and as a cultural and ecological space. The study is based on in-depth interviews with 15 representatives of old and new forms of cooperatives in Aegean Part of Turkey. It argues that the self-help culture of neoliberalism has triggered a localisation pattern of change, in which local efforts seek to revitalise rural regions and their economies by adopting a community model of cooperation in Turkey.

New ecological vision after the pandemic. Speeches of new agriculturalists in Sicily

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This qualitative social research focuses on new-rural practices in Sicily, the largest island in the Mediterranean. The goal is to understand the motivations driving new agriculturalists to leave the city and a structured working life, to move to the countryside, where they actively integrate into voluntary communities called "local nodes". These belong to the Sicilian Permaculture Movement and are configured as nets of mutual support. The data collection period lasted from March 2022 to September 2023 and was carried out in two of these nodes: MAEE (Mutuo Aiuto Etna Est) and MAI (Mutuo Aiuto Iblei). The ethnography was developed through fieldwork, participant observation, 12 semi-structured interviews and an open-ended questionnaire, whilst the analysis of the discourses was through Grounded Theory. The results show an acceleration of this new-rural model at the time of the Pandemic, with the transformation of the already existing Permaculture network in Sicily since 2010 into a Social Movement in June 2020. During the investigation, it appeared that these new-rural practices are usually informed by activists from global environmental movements (such as Extinction rebellion, Friday for future, Just Stop Oil) who have chosen to change their way of life and activism, moving from slogans in demonstrations to a life dedicated to "caring for the earth, people and future" as an ecological prefiguration. Many of them are agronomists, researchers, biologists, computer scientists, educators. The present study reports on this social reality of the Permaculture Sicilian Movement that recognises the values of Agroecology and the dynamic governance of Sociocracy. Objectives such as bioregionalism, energy self-sufficiency, fire prevention, seed

saving, are addressed for the protection and implementation of the island's biodiversity and to counter the increasing process of desertification.

The importance of rural spaces in permacultural worldview: The local areas as loci of progress

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Sustainable agricultural movements such as permaculture have been associated with contra-urban migration, when even born-urbanites relocate to rural areas to realize their desired alternative lifestyle. In the presentation, I argue relocations ignited by permaculture as a particular back-to-the-land movement are not primarily motivated by rejection of modernity or desire to return to a simpler lifestyle. Conversely, I show that the permacultural worldview presents itself as progressive, overcoming the supposed pitfalls of contemporary social organization. Combining a qualitative content analysis of 7 permacultural books with quantitative glimpses into a larger corpus of 24 books based on text mining in R, I reconstruct the worldview present in permacultural literature and its normative assertions of progress. Following Peter Wagner's sociology of modernity, I then interpret these assertions as modernizing. The results of the analysis posit permaculture as an alternative modernity, which seeks to establish a more efficient and more sustainable mode of social and economic organization, where the focus on rural places and attention to local particularities play the central role. Starting from the local, permaculturists wish to reorganize and progress the society to a more efficient, environmentally considered and permanent system, where holistic integration with regional conditions is indispensable. This desired modernization is strictly opposed to contemporary modes of organization, which are condemned as detached, plunderous, and wasteful due to in no small part the disregard for the conditions as well as possibilities of local environments. While permaculture is quite a loose and varied movement and we cannot assume that this ethos is shared among all permaculturists nor that it universally motivates contra-urbanisation, understanding this ethos can somewhat explain the importance rural places hold within the movement and why it sometimes does inspire relocation.

How are social networks structuring agricultural (un)sustainability? An example from Navarre (Spain)

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Social networks influence decision-making in agricultural landscapes by affecting how farmers access knowledge and resources. However, researchers ignore the disparate structures built to access different kinds of knowledge and resources and the social mechanisms that take place on such farmers' advice networks. We explored the role of social networks in decision-making among farmers in Navarre (Spain) to understand how and why some practices spread among farming communities. Social network analysis allows us to understand how farmers in this region share both knowledge and resources, and the potential implications of this sharing for the landscape. We find that large-scale farmers undertaking intensive land management are at the core of the network in this region, controlling the flow of knowledge and resources related to farm management, policy, technology, and finance. The central position of these farmers in

the social network, and their reputation, is key to the spread of intensive farming practices in the region, which ultimately may lead to homogenization of local agricultural landscapes. Understanding farmer network structures in a context of agricultural intensification can help tease out the social mechanisms, such as farmers joining each other in cooperatives, behind the spread of agricultural practices.

Exploring the appeal of different alternative food networks

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The worldwide industrialization of the agri-food system has altered how food is produced, accessed, and consumed, exerting intense pressure on producers to supply markets with cheap food. Not surprisingly, producers increasingly struggle to remain in business, and rural regions are progressively marginalized. As a response to the conventional agri-food system, alternative agri-food networks have emerged, commonly known as short food supply chains (SFSCs), typically discerned by different configurations (e.g., on-farm sales, farmers' markets, specialty shops, food box schemes, and community-supported agriculture). Equipped with a capacity to "re-socialize" and "re-spatialize" food, SFSCs allow consumers to reconnect with producers and production areas, safeguard a fair income for producers, stimulate job creation in rural areas, and curb the aging of rural communities. Despite the research interest that SFSCs have attracted in the last decade, little attention has been paid to the appeal of the different SFSC configurations. Our study aims to fill this gap and investigate what motivates consumers to buy from different SFSC outlets. With data from a survey with 321 SFSC buyers in Greece, we explore the potential differential effects of background features, practical aspects (e.g., taste, freshness), and higher-level motives (e.g., fair prices for producers, ethical employment) on purchases from five channels (i.e., on-farm sales, online farm sales, farmers' markets, roadside stands, and organic stores). The results reveal that differential effects can be observed, especially regarding background characteristics (e.g., residents of rural areas prefer on-farm sales as opposed to residents of urban areas who favor online farm sales). Still, central is the positive influence of higher-level motives across most channels, while the impact of practical aspects is even negative in some cases (e.g., roadside stands and organic stores). Accordingly, our study provides a more rigorous assessment of why consumers pursue different SFSC options and what these signify for rural economies.

Depopulation and imageries of the rural

Shaking up the urban-rural binary: Exploring commoning practices and imaginaries in the periurban monte in Mourente, Pontevedra (Galicia)

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This paper furthers both theoretical and empirical understanding of how commoning in periurban areas shakes up and reshapes institutional and socio-spatial relations around natural resource management. Peri-urban areas reflect and represent “density of social forms, types and meanings” that foment conflict and social evolution regarding land-use (Jaquinta & Drescher, 2000, p.2). They therefore blur the binary between places considered rural and urban, where urban population tends to be designated as ‘demanders’ and rural population as ‘suppliers’ when considering natural resource management (Weins et al., 2021). Peri-urban commons, as a conceptual and theoretical construct of ways to manage shared resources, exemplify these differing land-use patterns. They are said to provide recreational values for urban people and agriculture-focused output for people traditionally living in the countryside (ibid, 2021). Case study research on common land-use in the Mourente monte provides insight into a) what imaginaries guide commoners’ decisions regarding diverse economic activities in the research site, b) the responsibilities assigned to actors within commoning a diverse economy, and c) how institutional and socio-spatial relations create, uphold, or tear down the urban-rural binary.

The Mourente monte, at only three kilometers from the provincial capital Pontevedra (80,000 inhabitants), belongs to the lower mountains rising up to 600 meters from the Pontevedra Bay, north-western Spain. Its so-called monte area is a relatively infertile and steep hilly environment, traditionally used for forestry, grazing, and limited cropping. Mourente’s monte is governed by 144 so-called commoners who opt for land-use patterns that disrupt the State forestry logics to reflect new, unfolding urban-rural relations. Since the commoners in this peri-urban area do not need to make a living from the land, the land’s use oscillates between urban needs and those considered more rural – exemplifying interesting dynamics of how citizen involvement in natural resource management can enable wellbeing.

Contesting mainstream discourses about abandonment: Deviating discourses around rural depopulation in the Ancares mountains

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Over the past decades, industrialization in Europe has undergone consolidation and proliferation, causing a noteworthy shift in labor demand from rural to urban centers, whilst the industrialization of agriculture furthered the reduction of labor demand in rural areas. This trend has led to population decline in remote rural places in southern and central rural Europe, and (semi-)abandonment of villages. Consequently, focal point of academic, political, and social agendas is rural depopulation, research and policies primarily focusing on strategies for rural revitalization, often through a technical lens, emphasizing market-driven and technology-

oriented solutions framed within external interventions and bureaucratic structures. Our analysis aims to illuminate contesting discourses on rural revitalization, for which we adopt a constant comparative analysis, contrasting ethnographic data from the Ancares mountains in Galicia, Spain, with discourse analyses of academic and policy discussions related to abandonment. The region, characterized by an often-steep mosaic landscape of pastures, bushes and forests, has the status of Biosphere Reserve. In order to preserve its beauty, strict Nature 2000 regulations apply. Although the opinions among rural dwellers vary, we spoke with residents and local leaders in rural development who describe the many external revitalization efforts as mere theatre, suggesting that the proposed measures are unilateral and intended to make a spectacle, turning the region—and its inhabitants—into a circus. They argue that the mainstream discourse, centered on abandonment quantification, renders the area invisible, reducing it to a mere natural site, which its inhabitants in fact preserve and reproduce and make attractive for outsiders. Our study contends that the mainstream discourse diverges from and obscures the interests of those who inhabit rural areas, and calls for considering their perspectives and needs to formulate effective, sustainable and inclusive approaches to combat rural depopulation, and to build future perspectives upon agency and concerns of rural inhabitants.

Social strengthening in “Empty Spain”. A case of community social innovation and revitalization

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The paper explores the processes of revitalization that have recently emerged in rural territories belonging to so called "Empty Spain". Even though most of studies assume that one of the biggest consequences of depopulation is the weakening of social capital, this research shows how different entities are being able to mobilize and develop actions based on local rooting and community. In fact, the analysis describes how the sense of belonging becomes a main driver for collective action. Thus, the theoretical framework is constructed under the notion of community, participation, and community social innovation, linking social innovation to empowerment, mobilization and social transformation. The study takes a qualitative approach, and focuses in five entities placed in the Southeast of the province of Burgos, in central Spain. The research reflects, on one hand, the relevance of severe depopulation consequences in the origin of these entities, highlighting at the same time the role of local rootedness and attachment as a lever to participation and involvement in the actions promoted. That is, it shows how the idea of belonging and identification with the place are essential in the success of a process in which emotions become key factors. The analysis also reveals how the definition of a previously shared working procedure is essential for the development and implementation of those actions. However, despite the (positive) results achieved, the participants are aware of depopulated contexts complexity, moreover in order to obtain long –term human involvement and economic resources.

Socio-economic factors of the rural women exodus: Insights from a Spanish region

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Sustainable rural development faces the lack of job opportunities and the lack of facilities that can potentially fix the population to the territory, what can be accentuated for women depopulation.

This study aims to advance in the identification of the main socioeconomic factors of rural women exodus in the rural Aragón. The objective is to better understand the main patterns and causes for why women abandon rural areas and migrate to urban cities. These findings could be a reference in the design of strategies to promote women rural development and also to reduce rural women exodus, in order to strengthen their social position in rural areas through the improvement of their living conditions. Using a sample of 627 women, we apply a multinomial logit model to assess diverse factors affecting rural women exodus. As a groundbreaking contribution, we evaluate whether women's personal assessment of intangible aspects inherent to the territory such as landscape or liveliness in the area, among others, or even variables that measure women time use have an impact on their decision to remain in the area.

Results highlight the importance of mobility and its problems in rural areas, pointing out that the availability and use of vehicles is a relevant factor for settling in rural areas. The incorporation of social capital variables has proven to be successful, underlining the high explanatory power of the degree of penetration of women in participatory and decision-making bodies. The degree of development of public services available in each municipality is also a key factor in the decision to migrate. Municipalities with between 2,000 and 5,000 inhabitants are those with the lowest female exodus, as this allows them to combine work opportunities in a nearby area with an attractive range of services and activities, allows them a future in the territory.

Peri-urban, mobilised... and markedly vulnerable

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Mobility is a key element for the resilience of rural populations in the face of concentration trends in metropolitan centres. Consequently, it is greater in rural areas than in urban areas, being mainly car-based. However, access to mobility is unequal, as it depends on the resources available to rural inhabitants and on different vulnerability factors.

This paper attempts to highlight the difficulties of access to mobility - and therefore to services and resources - of different rural population profiles in the Vega de Sevilla region (Spain). A relatively populated area with acceptable communication and transport conditions, but where we recognize different limitations of access to mobility, similar to those suffered by populations in more remote rural areas. Qualitative research was conducted here at two different points in time: the period after the 2008 crisis (2015) and the situation after the COVID pandemic crisis (2023). The research was carried out with thirty semi-structured interviews in the first period

and six in the second, the latter more focused on the previously identified vulnerable profiles. The exploitation of discursive data was carried out by focusing on aspects relating to the relationship between mobility and vulnerability.

The results highlight the importance of social factors, mainly class, but also gender, origin, age, and functional diversity, in defining situations of vulnerability in relation to mobility and transport. They also highlight the complex strategies that people in these situations have to deploy, despite the relative availability of infrastructures in metropolitan rural areas.

Rural youth and mobilities

Youth mobility patterns in sparsely populated areas of Croatia: The case study of the Lika region

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The Lika region, a rural and mountainous area in Croatia in need of support for any kind of repopulation, with a depopulation rate of more than 10% (2021 census), is of particular interest due to its especially vulnerable youth population that is continuously emigrating. It is the most sparsely populated region in the country, with a population density of less than 7 inhabitants per km². The infrastructural isolation, the local government that is neither responsive to the bottom-up/top-down approach nor to the community-based approach, the precariousness, the passivity of the local communities themselves, the legacy of the Homeland War, the lack of educational opportunities, the problems of migrants, the local community that has been living on the “frontier of Europe” for centuries - all these criticisms are the subject of qualitative research (43 semi-structured interviews coded in MAXQDA 24.1.0.) conducted in 2022 with interviewees aged 18 to 35 years (criterion - completed formal education). The interviewees were divided into four groups: Locals, returnees, immigrants and emigrants from the Lika region. On the other hand, the main findings regarding the reasons for staying or returning to the region were self-employment, family and real estate/land ownership, the geographical location of the region, the opportunities for digital nomadism, the peaceful and tranquil natural and rural environment and the positive interpersonal relationships in the small local communities. Villages and small towns as a safe place and an opportunity to raise a family were attractive as a remigration opportunity for these individuals who are currently migrating to the cities. The research is directly related to the interdisciplinary research project funded by the Croatian Science Foundation entitled “Establishing criteria for the Evaluation of Modernization and (Post-)Transition Processes in Croatian Rural Areas through a Case Study of the Rural Lika Area”.

Interlinking factors influencing three main rural social-ecological challenges: Depopulation, farmer generational renewal and the adoption of sustainable farming models

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Rural depopulation, farmer generational renewal and industrialized agriculture’s environmental impacts are pressing challenges making rural areas more vulnerable and food systems less resilient. According to Spanish National Statistics Institute (INE) data, 45.6% of small rural municipalities in Spain have a shrinking population. Also, the number of livestock and agricultural holdings has decreased by 30.1% and 7.6% respectively in the past 10 years. Moreover, for every farm manager under 45 there are three over 65, and only one in every four farm managers is a woman. Finally, farms in Spain are predominantly non-organic (92%) and

are intensifying their production, as demonstrated by the significant increase of greenhouse farms (+42%), and poultry and pig production (+15 and +22 % respectively). The above-mentioned trends seem to be strongly connected, as agricultural and especially livestock smallholdings with sustainable farming models have been historically the ones settling population in rural areas due to both the economic and cultural attachment to the land. Moreover, there is a clear relationship between biophysical degradation, ecosystem services and family farm's decline in Spanish agriculture. Finally, there is some evidence suggesting that women farm managers adopt more economically and environmentally sustainable farming models than men. Still, most previous research has looked at the choice of sustainable farming models, population settlement, and generational renewal as separate and binary yes/no problems, and there is a generalized lack of gender perspectives on these issues. In this presentation we will introduce the FARM project, which explores the factors shaping farmer renewal, settlement and farming models in an interlinked way, through a gender perspective and focusing on Spanish underpopulated rural areas. Although still in a preliminary phase, we will introduce our methods and design in the hope that they spark lively discussions about potential synergies with similar projects.

A sealed destiny? Conditions for the labour and professional development of rural youth

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This paper deals with the expectations and possibilities of employment for rural youth, although it focuses on the limitations they suffer, linked to social origin, gender, educational trajectories, development policies and the effects of public employment policies themselves. The relevance of this issue is given by the strong link between employment opportunities and remaining in rural areas or migrating to urban areas. And, therefore, with the processes of depopulation and decapitalisation of young people in rural areas. The analysis is based on more than a decade of research, focused, but not exclusively, on Spain, in which both qualitative and quantitative methods have been used. This is currently leading to an ongoing project (ProyExcel_00354) which explores the impact of the social, administrative and territorial context, as well as public policies on employment and entrepreneurship, on the employment expectations and roots of rural youth. The general results of the line point to different axes, each of which has a relevant impact on the social sustainability of the rural environment. In this sense, although the conditions of each territorial context explain to a large extent the expectations and trajectories of the young population, the social origin is no less important. In turn, gender orients towards certain studies and occupational niches. Likewise, young women often feel more uncomfortable with the sociable conditions in rural areas, which contributes to their greater willingness to emigrate. Education, development and employment policies, for their part, also have a particular impact on youth employment and entrepreneurship opportunities, as well as on their mobility.

Double residence among rural youth in Spain. Quantification and related factors

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Traditionally, young people have been identified as the most mobile sector of rural populations. Either for reasons of work, study, leisure, or to access basic services not available in their habitats, rural young people's daily life is spread over a wide geographical space. Often, these practices go beyond daily commuting, and rural youngsters become floating populations, not being present in rural spaces during the week-time, during specific job campaigns, or during higher education's school periods. This paper analyses the practice of double residence among young people living in sparsely populated areas in Spain, both aiming at quantifying the phenomenon, and also trying to explain its causes and factors associated to it. We use the term "double residence" to identify those situations in which young people live part of the time in their parental household, and part of the time in a different dwelling, where they have a greater level of autonomy. We quantify the proportion of young people (aged 16-29) living in Spain's rural areas (Municipalities with less than 5.000 inhabitants) as reaching figures close to 20% in some cases. We are also able to identify those areas in Spain in which young people are more likely to perform this type of pendular movements: especially the most de-populated and remote. Also, the main factors associated with this practice are analyzed, using bi-variable analyses with aggregated data at municipal level. Our results point not only to geographical characteristics of the place of origin (such as driving distance to urban areas) but also to economical (labour markets) and socio-demographic traits (such as education levels of the adult populations).

Life trajectories and mobility of rural youth in periurban areas. A case study in Navarre

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A main aim of cohesion policies is to consolidate social capital in disadvantaged territories, since it strengthens their competitiveness, resilience and possibilities for participation in regional development programs. In this sense, the emigration of rural youth due to disparities in access to opportunities and welfare services is a determining factor in the decline and depopulation of these areas. The intensification of daily mobility has allowed the multiplication of rural-urban connections, as well as hybrid strategies that combine commuting and residences to access training and employment in distant centres. But as mobility becomes a coercive necessity and car dependency one of its manifestations, unequal resources condition youth transitions towards professional qualification and insertion, as well as their life choices to stay or migrate.

The paper explores these transitions of rural young adults (aged 16-34 years) based on fieldwork carried out in a peri-urban county in southern Europe. The research is part of the RURAL ACCESS project funded by the Spanish R&D&I Program (PID2019-111201RB-I00) and includes a focus group and 32 in-depth interviews in 16 locations with experts, key informants and different profiles of young people from various nationalities.

The analysis explores daily residential, training, employment and mobility strategies, as well as aspirations and their expectations for the future, revealing the interconnections between physical and social mobility. The results show the contribution of the sociological approach to the understanding of the complexity of the decapitalization of youth in rural areas. We show the multidimensionality of territorial structures of opportunities and how they affect qualification, rootedness or emigration. Finally, we analyse different moments in these rural youth transitions, which are also the subject of public policy discourses, and which allow us to delve into a social imaginary that questions cohesion policies.

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