

Ends and Means in Spanish Depopulation Policies: Rethinking Development Objectives in Sparsely Populated Rural Areas

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Abstract: This study explores how the existing duality between ends and means, prevalent in both political and academic frameworks, can be overcome. Focusing on the case of Spain, the study analyzes how depopulation policies define their objectives and the extent to which they adhere to a demographically incrementalist paradigm. Finally, conclusions are drawn regarding the formulation of strategies to invigorate rural areas experiencing population decline. The aim is to ensure that these objectives are the product of a balanced debate on both ends and means, thereby contributing to the development of individuals and the rural communities in which they reside.

Keywords: depopulation, depopulation policies, rural development, shrinking regions

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1. Introduction

Objectives form a central part of any decision. Therefore, their contemplation is essential. The contrary would be absurd, although common¹. The goals of some policies form part of a naturalised social consensus as a certainty and have hardly been reflected upon. In these cases, both the policymakers and the researchers concentrate on formulating specific measures to facilitate them, with no further contemplation. This is perhaps because their training and socialising process has led them to internalise these objectives as being appropriate. In addition, focusing on the technical part of the problem, without considering complex matters avoids friction and increases productivity in terms of academic publications or laws and strategies in parliaments.

The demographic policies in Spain, particularly those referring to sparsely populated areas, are a good example of this gap between ends and means. Therefore, with respect to the population, growth is considered as an axiom, a synonym for development and well-being, and as the principal framework for overcoming rural shrinking (Sousa and Pinho, 2015).

This barely questioned consensus has relevant consequences. This paper analyses how consequences arise and the nature of these consequences in the elaboration and implementation of strategies rooted in the growth paradigm². It is true that today, the principal goal is not expressly to recover a certain level of population from the past, and other objectives are proposed, such as equal rights and opportunities and social and territorial cohesion. However, the approach to these policies and their effective evaluation is ultimately made in accordance with the statistics of the resident population. In our opinion, this uncritical growthism and the technocratic functional approach taken are matters that have received very little attention in Spain in the discussions on rural development and they are contemplated together even less. However, they are decisive for inspiring policies and ways of researching which we believe to be unfocused.

¹ Seneca to Lucilius letter 71. "If you don't know what harbour you sail for, no wind is favourable".

² The phrase "Fight against depopulation" can be found at the start of strategies and laws of different levels of Spanish government, from the national to the regional level, and in the concept papers of political parties. In addition to revealing the objective of overcoming depopulation, from loss to growth in net terms, the language is warlike and very intense compared to the more contained, rigorous and enabling language in the European Union documents (Espon) that propose "mitigating" and "adapting" strategies.

This study seeks to explain the lack of thinking on the demographic growth objectives, which are impossible in practical terms in declining rural areas, and the consequences that this entails.

The next section attempts to describe how demographic increase has been naturalised as an indisputable objective, inherent in the idea of development, despite its impossibility. The subsequent section explains why the social science field, particularly Economics, hardly addresses the discussion on the appropriateness of the objectives of the policies, with the justification that it is not the competence of researchers to examine matters that are considered as being subjective. The study goes on to explain how this duality between ends and means prevailing in the political and academic schemes can be overcome and the authors propose a comprehensive approach to strategies that revitalize sparsely populated territories. The study focuses on the Spanish case, explaining how the depopulation policies define their objectives and the extent to which they remain within the demographically incrementalist paradigm. Finally, we will draw conclusions on how to define strategies in order to invigorate the sparsely populated and declining rural areas, so that the objectives are the result of debates on the ends and means considered jointly, contributing to the development of people and the rural communities in which they live.

2. Demographic growth as an indisputable objective

Growth is a naturalised objective and intrinsic to the human condition. It is barely discussed in either its most intuitive meaning, associated with higher levels of production and consumption or in the demographic sense, increasing the size of the community to which one belongs.

Therefore, most governments continue to assume that demographic growth improves the well-being of its citizens (Bucci et al., 2024; Lindblom, 2024). It is considered that a greater population size strengthens a country, from both a geopolitical and economic perspective.

This link between development and population also prevails from the most influential positions of economic science. The approaches based on deductive and conceptual arguments accept maximisation as an axiom of human behaviour, from which neoclassical microeconomic theory is derived. The *homo economicus* that personifies it

has the goal of obtaining the greatest possible utility in accordance with consumption, assuming, from the opposite side of supply, that the boundaries of production opportunities can always be moved and business opportunities can always be expanded, without limits to the availability of resources, as rational individuals will always want more (Sen, 1977).

The field of *New Economic Geography* provides an empirical and conceptual basis in terms of the advantages of having a larger and more dense population on a local scale. Agglomeration economies explain that companies obtain a higher level of productivity if they are located in densely populated areas. This is the so-called “triumph of the city” (Glaesser, 2011). If a broader macro perspective is adopted, the increases in the number of inhabitants of a country lead to a greater demand for companies, which could enable them to pay their workers better. In turn, their governments would have a greater fiscal capacity to finance a costly welfare state and growing pension systems, which are the foundations of current democracies.

In other words, we could refer to two complementary perspectives structured by the idea of growth in economic theory. The latter is more recognisable, that is, macro, on a country scale. The former is more implicit, streamlined and maximising with an individualist introspective root. They constitute two ways of arguing assembled within the same logic.

This idea of undefined growth, however, is not a monolithic interpretation without flaws. At the beginnings of Economics as a discipline, we can find critical ideas, such as those of Malthus and Mill. The former observed diverging dynamics between the very slow growth rate of natural resources and the accelerating birthrate, which would lead to collapse. Demographic shrinkage would be the result of famines, epidemics and wars in situations of “misery” (Malthus, 1798). Degrowth is undesirable and dismal (Dixon, 2006), but inevitable. Malthus did not consider the importance of technological change or that of other innovations that led to a higher productivity that used fewer resources. Neither did he appreciate a change in reproductive behaviours in accordance with a higher survival rate of children (Fernandez-Villaverde, 2001). Therefore, as shown by the facts, growth overcame the limitations of Malthusian thought and began to predominate with the beginning of capitalism and economic theory. It is true that “the effects of Malthus’ population principle have only been postponed because of the enormous energetic subsidy that the human economy obtained and continues to obtain by tapping the

underground storage of solar energy of millions of Palaeolithic summers, called fossil fuels” (Kerschner,2010). In fact, his basic ideas have reappeared in recent years and we can refer to an ecological neo-Malthusianism, with significant prominence within the discussions on sustainability.

On the other hand, Mill considered that the appropriate objective was to curb material and demographic growth in order to obtain “the steady state or stationary state”, although he was aware of the difficulties, bearing in mind the predominant mentality³. His reasoning was not so much empirical but normative and ethical, justifying a qualitative, humanist development with a redistributive sense. He considered that in the mid-nineteenth century, the material well-being was more than sufficient to be able to have a meaningful life and with individual and collective effort goals of a spiritual nature should be sought, related to knowledge and philanthropy. Furthermore, this “stationary state” would be the way to avoid systemic crises associated with mature economies in which decreasing yields and a lack of opportunities leads the maximising agents to partake in speculative behaviour, generating bubbles and severe imbalances. In this new order, a stabilised demography and a critical thought that appreciates community and the value of nature will have overcome the desire to inhabit all of the territories and transform them into marketable resources.

The theories of Mill and Malthus were not popular enough among their contemporaries to be taken into account in research agendas and policy design. It was not until sometime after the Second World War, during the 1960s, that the “limits to growth” were discussed again (Meadows et al., 1972). Although the trigger was a political and economic crisis in the most conventional terms, monetary and energy shocks, together with wars, new and acute uncertainty related to the environment and planetary social imbalances arose, which gave rise to a reconsideration of the feasibility and consistency of the prevailing world order and the introduction of alternative perspectives. Since then, the idea of a stationary state and one of degrowth has gained supporters from citizen movements and the research community, consolidating methodologies aimed at sustainable development, giving rise, at last, to interdisciplinary approaches which give

³ When Mill writes, he sees the social life characterized by endless struggles to get on and by “(...) trampling, crushing, elbowing, and treading on each other's heels ...” (Mill, 1866,453)

special value to the applicability of the theories and their relevance for improving peoples' lives.

In any event, although these discussions are drawing increasing attention, they remain on a secondary level for academia and governments. In the political agenda, it is true that sustainability is referred to as an objective similar in importance to equity, stability and efficiency (Musgrave, 1956), with texts of great symbolic value, such as the 2030 Agenda, and even legally binding, such as the Paris Agreement. However, they are focused on green growth, reducing the energy intensity of production and the emissions intensity of energy. That is, the challenges are confined to technological aspects, with no contemplation of the cultural change and day-to-day behaviour, which would imply addressing them with all of the consequences (Jakob et al.,2020). Underlying discussions on whether limitless growth in demography and consumption is possible within the current financial capitalism and reasonable within the neoclassical economy are evaded (Priewe,2022).

In the case of Spain, the contradictions associated with the inevitability of shrinking population are also avoided, because it would stigmatise the politicians who were honest (Reckien and Martinez-Fernandez, 2011; Syssner,2016). No mayor or any regional president would acknowledge that there will be less residents in the medium to long term. Similarly, researchers do not use the forums in which they coincide with the elite intellectuals and politicians to deliberate over the most plausible demographic and territorial scenarios. This would imply defending strategies of adaptation rather than mitigation for the depopulated rural world (Copus et al., 2021; Pinilla, 2023) and represent an uncomfortable turn in the form and content of policy making that would be met with not only less understanding but also less institutional support for the research projects.

The following section contemplates some of the reasons for the lack of thinking on the ends and means in the university world, particularly in Economics, which usually inspires rural development strategies from a paradigm focused on population growth and an increase in competitiveness (Dax and Copus, 2022).

3. Neutrality that is not neutral: policies and values.

As indicated by Blaug (1980, 150), the distinction between positive Economics, with its propositions “on what it is” and normative Economics, “on what it should be”, consolidated in the second half of the nineteenth century and the classification was assumed by the rest of the social sciences. When objective issues are separated from subjective assessments, it can be considered that “Economics is a science in the same sense as Astronomy, Chemistry and Philosophy” (Cairnes, 1873, 252). Therefore, the debate on objectives, to the extent that they carry value judgements that are impossible to justify on strictly logical and empirical bases, is somewhat removed from the research process, focused on hypotheses that conclude with quantifiable evidence. Goals, by definition, are not the concern of the researcher or the policymaker who attempt to be rigorous. They are exogenously established. They constitute a piece of information that is taken as a key inspiring reference, but not an internal variable to reconsider.

This scientific position that splits the ends from the means with prominent advocates such as Weber, Robbins, Bresciani-Turroni and, particularly Friedman, had already been overcome at the beginning of the second half of the last century. Myrdal (1933) indicated the impossibility of filtering subjective assessments in economic analysis, given that the instruments proposed for obtaining an end are not neutral. They trigger different consequences and, therefore, there is some type of bias in their selection. The ends can be as ideological as the means. They are interdependent and their distinction is related more to practical and contextual issues than to clear and definitive categories. This systematic and interdependent consideration of social sciences in epistemological terms occurs even more in the field of public policies, in which the policy tools and objectives overlap and are resignified, shaping a comprehensive strategy with its own sense, each incoherent without the other. Therefore, it is not possible to disregard the judgement values on either the analytical or practical level, because ends and means are interdependent and interchangeable, impregnating all discussions, including those of a technical and scientific nature.

It is surprising that, in the most renowned current research, given the now long-term validity of the pluralist approach (Hutchison, 1964), a strict dualism still prevails and the objectives are an extra-disciplinary element, either resolved or irrelevant. This omission is also present in the way policies are made, as we shall see later.

Our principal explanation is practical, a consideration of the predominant academic and political cultures, the shift from research to ROI-search (Return On Investment) (Alvesson, 2012), and infotainment (Delli Carpini and Williams, 2017). Critically thinking on the *raison d'être* of theories requires the contemplation of topics that go beyond the areas of specialisation and experiences and knowledge rooted in reality. Both tasks take time, which is a very scarce resource with high *opportunity costs*. All of this implies a more open and less assertive research style, aware of the limitations of highly streamlined theoretical approaches (Leahey et al., 2017), when the realities, particularly those of the rural world, do not conform to a one size fits all approach (Sherry and Shortall, 2019). Finally, it also requires having to interact with colleagues from other fields of knowledge and attempt to obtain coherent syntheses. On the other hand, “Good fences make good neighbors”, as indicated by Buchanan and Tullock, (1963) in the introduction of *The Calculus of Consent*, to justify the then disruptive “political economy”, which was introduced circumspectly into fertile but little cultivated areas as they belonged to frontier topics and methodologies.

In the political realm, reconsidering the assigned mandate is not common. The policymakers are selected based on performance, either in terms of their ideological affinity with the politician who manages this area, that is, coinciding on the ends and principles, or in terms of their knowledge, due to the technical quality of the response that they could give, the fundamentals of which are unquestionable due to their renowned expertise.

Therefore, although from the Philosophy of Science, the impossibility of separating the ends from the policies has been recognised for some time, and in the more applied research of all the social sciences there is a growing idea that “many questions -practical, strategic, political, ethical, personal-... are integral to it (research)(Katz, 1994), we find that in mainstream academia and politics there is a predominance of the most radical dualism.

There are abundant examples of these omissions in Spanish legislation referring to the rural world and its research. It does not ask “what kind of local and regional development and for whom?” (Pike et al., 2007). It is understood that the only way to invigorate shrinking areas is to increase the number of inhabitants. So that although the strategies refer to cohesion and equal opportunities as goals (Harvey, 2005), the imaginary reflected in the texts is that of villages recovering their maximum levels of

population of the past, from which there are still survivors who experienced the rural exodus traumatically and idealise the former situation in their nostalgia.

In our opinion, challenging discussions on objectives would increase the rigour not only as they would obtain more consistent conclusions, but they would remind us of the inevitability of the values inherent in those conducting the research, such as humility and honesty “as researchers carry the responsibility to be aware of our own positionality and subjectivity, which shape our inquiries” (Sandman et al., 2024). It would be a case of improving a good technique with the awareness of what is sought.

4. How the “fight against depopulation” arose in Spain

Spain has never been a densely populated country; in fact it is the opposite. Its agroclimatic characteristics with strong slopes due to the large amount of mountain chains and a semi-arid climate determined low levels of agricultural productivity and, therefore, low population densities in a pre-industrial economy (Pinilla, 2004). The idea of colonising some of its emptiest spaces was promoted by its elite enlightened scholars at the end of the eighteenth century and formed part of the agricultural policies until well into the twentieth century (Paniagua, 1992). The current demography of the sparsely populated rural areas is, first, a result of the migratory processes that began in Spain from the 1950s and acquired particular intensity in the two following decades. The strong economic growth during the Golden Age determined an intense spatial polarisation. The absence of territorial cohesion policies during Franco's dictatorship was patent, although this played a smaller role in comparison with the profound causes of the rural exodus (Collantes and Pinilla, 2011). However, within the idealisation that nationalist regimes make of their rural roots, there were positions within their *intelligentsia* that promoted some type of strategy for the severe territorial imbalance that triggered rapid growth (Paniagua 2016). The rural exodus with a strong gender and youth bias generated a highly masculinised and elderly society, leading at the end of the twentieth century to natural negative growth, which, in the absence of immigration generated demographic shrinkage (Collantes et al., 2014).

The transition to democracy, beginning in 1975, did not give rise to an immediate implementation of new cohesion policies, as within a context marked by an intense decentralisation process, which led to the organisation of a quasi-federal state. So, the

territorial debate was almost totally monopolised by the financing of the new autonomous regions. The challenges associated with the management of costly and complex budget functions (education, health, social assistance) dominated the political agenda. Issues such as territorial cohesion and rural development were consigned to the European level at a time when the policies of the European Community were being ambitiously redefined (Ross and Jenson, 2017) and many Spanish regions were ideal candidates as beneficiaries, not only financially but also in terms of “know-how” on local and regional development, particularly about institutional innovation (Esparcia, 2000; Pinilla and Sáez, 2021).

In this way, although some strategies date back to the end of the twentieth century and beginning of the twenty-first century, elaborated by governments of regions highly affected by depopulation, such as Aragón and Castilla-León, they were not sufficiently robust in their implementation. In any case, they implied a recognition in the local public agenda that contrasted with their absence in the rest of Spain and in the policies of the central government (Pinilla, 2021).

It was not until later, at the end of 2016, when the topic emerged with force, paradoxically driven by the problem that had previously eclipsed it, the financing of the autonomous regions. The rules of the *budget game* between the regions is a negotiation in which the threat capacity is decisive (nationalism/separatism, generation/rupture of coalitions) (León, 2009). Justifying tax advantages with a new asset led to the formation of a lobby of the eight most depopulated autonomous regions (Aragón, Asturias, Cantabria, Castilla y León, Castilla-La Mancha, Extremadura, Galicia and La Rioja), which are archetypes of the “places that don’t matter” in Spain (Rodríguez-Pose, 2018), and began to enjoy an unexpected protagonism. On 17 January 2017, in the Conference of presidents of the autonomous regions in which a new financing system was negotiated, it was agreed that the Spanish government, presided by the conservative Rajoy, would elaborate a global and transversal National Strategy for the Demographic Challenge. This would be approved by a different social democratic government in 2019 (Ministry of Territorial Policy and Public Function, 2019). A few months later in the same year, the Ministry for the Ecological Transition and the Demographic Challenge was created with a department specifically responsible for the fight against depopulation.

During 2019 and 2020, its experts worked on the elaboration of General Guidelines, which, despite being almost ready to be approved, remained on stand-by due to the new scenario caused by COVID 19. Subsequently, the expansive budget policies that were

broadly implemented across all of the countries of the European Union enabled additional costs to be assumed that the ordinary budgets could not cover. Within this context, it became possible to better develop the depopulation policies with a powerful financial muscle.

In March 2021, within the context of the Recovery, Transformation and Resilience Plan, 130 measures were passed to fight the Demographic Challenge, with a total budget of over 10 billion euros (Ministry for the Ecological Transition and Demographic Challenge, 2021; Sáez, 2021). As we can see, in barely three years, a very detailed institutional framework had arisen from scratch in response to a new political demand that was easy to implement within the Next Generation funds, accrediting the demands of the European Union for structural reforms in terms of sustainability and territorial cohesion.

In parallel, the majority of the regional governments have been passing specific laws and strategies in recent years (Table 1) (Esparcia, 2021). The exceptions are Catalonia, although it is referred to in its “Rural Agenda” and the Basque Country, which dilutes it within the demographic changes of the 2030 Agenda (youth emancipation, family, ageing, migratory insertion). In mid-2024, the parliaments of Murcia, the Canary Islands and Andalusia are in the process of elaborating laws that would directly address rural shrinking. The case of the government of Castilla and León is surprising as, together with Aragon, it was one of the first regions to publish specific laws (the former in May 2010 and the latter in 2000) but was one of the last to join the current legislative “wave”. To date, it has only advanced in youth emancipation, without altering its initial and openly “incrementalist” approaches.

Table 1. Depopulation strategies in Spain: main characteristics

GOVERNMENTS	STRATEGIES	PRIMARY OBJECTIVES	SECONDARY OBJECTIVES	APPROACH
Spain (Central Government)	Plan of 130 measures to combat the demographic challenge (2021) https://www.miteco.gob.es/content/dam/miteco/es/retos-demografico/temas/medidas-retos-demografico/plan_recuperacion_130_medidas_tcm30-524369.pdf	Territorial and social cohesion and guarantee equal rights/opportunities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Economic diversification • Innovation • Digital connectivity • Connect the urban and rural • Endogenous development • Ensure basic services • Demographic perspective in management 	Hybrid “Fight against depopulation” (appears 9 times in the document)
Andalusia	Strategy to combat the Demographic Challenge in Andalusia (under development) https://www.juntadeandalucia.es/boja/2023/84/BOJA23-084-00004-7915-01_00282948.pdf	Territorial cohesion that contributes to population settlement	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Families - conciliation • The elderly. • Territorial planning, urban planning and housing. • ITCs and digital connectivity. • Nature and climate change. • Entrepreneurship among young people and women. • Retaining the population with tax advantages. • Territorial cohesion and equal opportunities. • Infrastructures, transport and mobility. • Agricultural and food sector: • Demographic perspective in public actions. 	Hybrid “Settlement/retaining” of the population
Aragón	Law for revitalising the rural environment of Aragón (2023) https://www.boe.es/eli/es-ar/l/2023/03/30/13	Equal opportunities and quality of life and (“invigoration and revitalisation”)	<p>Sustainability, multifunctionality and ecological transition.</p> <p>Equal opportunity between men and women.</p> <p>Economic diversification, employment and entrepreneurship.</p>	Hybrid “Economic and social development... That enables the consolidation and

			<p>Attracting and retaining population in the rural environment.</p> <p>Infrastructures and access to services</p> <p>Connectivity and digital transition.</p> <p>Territorial balance and social cohesion</p> <p>Coordination of levels of government and social agents</p> <p>Participation in rural strategies</p>	increase in the population”.
Asturias	<p>Demographic Boost Law (2024)</p> <p>https://www.boe.es/eli/es-as/l/2024/04/30/2</p>	<p>Demographic boost:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Balancing the demographic structure • Territorial balance (rural depopulation) • Territorial and social cohesion 	<p>Coordination of sectoral policies</p> <p>Citizen participation and coordinated action of institutions and civil society</p>	Hybrid “Fighting against depopulation”
Canary Islands	Round tables on the demographic challenge (under development)			
Cantabria	Law to redress depopulation and the demographic challenge (under development)			
Castilla-La Mancha	<p>Law of Economic, Social and Taxation Measures to combat Depopulation and for the Development of the Rural Environment in Castilla-La Mancha (2021) https://www.boe.es/eli/es-cm/l/2021/05/07/2</p>	<p>Comprehensive development of the rural environment:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Fight against depopulation • Basic accessible services • Rural-urban equality 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Maintenance of the population • Attracting and retaining population • Social, economic and territorial balance • Conserve rural values • Promotion of equality, gender, ages 	Hybrid although with marked “incrementalism”
Castilla and León	<p>Draft bill of Demographic Sustainability and rural development in Castilla and León and the Demographic and Territorial Sustainability Strategy of Castilla and León (under development)</p> <p>https://participacyl.es/legislation/processes/2696/proposals</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reverse or mitigate (increase and attract population) • Equality, access to basic services and vital opportunities 		
Catalonia	Rural Agenda of Catalonia (not specified, 2022-27)	Rural development		

	Interdepartmental Commission (2017) Commission for the rural invigoration strategy	Coordination		
Region of Valencia	Integrated law of measures to tackle depopulation and territorial equity in the Region of Valencia (2023) https://www.boe.es/eli/es-vc/l/2023/04/13/5 Avant Strategy 20-30. Strategic anti-depopulation plan of Valencia (2021) https://avant.gva.es/documents/173292247/173293721/ESTRATEGIA_AVANT_20-30_c.pdf/9f4c4e85-4248-4d1f-955c-b2ae0669fa7b	Halt and reverse depopulation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Quality of life, economic and social feasibility, institutional treatment. • Diversified, innovative and sustainable economic development. • Social, economic and territorial cohesion and the reduction of the rural-urban gap. • landscape, heritage and cultural values. • Equality between men and women. • Employment, leisure, training opportunities, care and access to services. • Equity in educational system. 	Hybrid although with marked “incrementalism”
Extremadura	Law of measures against the demographic and territorial challenge of Extremadura (2022) https://www.boe.es/eli/es-ex/l/2022/03/17/3	“fight against depopulation” through: Basic services Equal opportunities Inclusive social development	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Demographic perspective. • Basic accessible public services. • Human capital and social capital. • return of those who wish to return and talent links/networks. • Promotion of agriculture and agroindustry. • Ecological transition. • R+D+i. • Internet connectivity. • family agriculture. • Transnational cooperation (Portugal). • Values of the rural environment. 	Hybrid although with marked “incrementalism”

			<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Intergenerational. programmes and shared spaces. • Silver economy. • sustainable tourism. • Care of dependents. 	
Galicia	Demographic boost law of Galicia (2021) https://www.boe.es/eli/es-ga/l/2021/02/02/5/con	“Demographic boost” (more than quantitative, focused on the desires, expectations, life projects and appropriateness of living in this space)	Principles more than objectives Although later, its articles are extensive, maximalist and meticulous, it fundamentally refers to capacities and expectations	In its initial general proposals it is “adaptive” when disregarding strategic areas interpreted in statistical and incremental terms. (It never refers to the “fight against population”)
La Rioja	Strategy to address the demographic challenge and depopulation in La Rioja: balance, social cohesion and transversality (2020) https://www.larioja.org/agenda-poblacion/es/objetivos	“Reverse the demographic trend”	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Support to families • Youth emancipation • Interculturality • Voluntary return • Territorial development and rural depopulation • Active ageing 	Incrementalist, the only one that establishes population goals for 2023 (short by 800) and 2030 However, a fairly well reasoned diagnosis
Madrid	Strategy to revive rural municipalities (2023) https://www.comunidad.madrid/sites/default/files/e-strategia_para_la_revitalizacion_de_los_municipios_rurales_v9_0.pdf	Demographic challenge: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Structure of the population pyramid • Invigorate less inhabited spaces • quality of life / service provision • Increase average income 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Social, territorial and economic cohesion • Economic development • Social development • Environmental development • Governance development 	Incrementalist, analysis of results based on census 2017-2022
Murcia	Special Study Commission to address the Demographic Challenge and Depopulation in the Region of Murcia (under development)			

	http://www.asambleamurcia.es/xi-legislatura-0-1/arm/organos/no-rectores/comisiones-2/arm/organos-xi/no-rectores/comisiones/no?language=en			
Navarra	Interdepartmental Commission (2019) http://www.lexnavarra.navarra.es/detalle.asp?r=52099 strategy to fight against depopulation https://administracionlocal.navarra.es/areas/Despoblacion-EstrategialuchaDespoblacion/SiteAssets/default/ESTRATEGIA%20DESPOBLACION%20DE F%20aprobada.pdf	Coordinate Minimise depopulation and its consequences Maintain and revitalise the population in depopulated areas	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The new population • Basic services • Social relations • Economic cohesion • Territorial cohesion • Identity and value of rural life 	Incrementalist
Basque Country	Basque strategy 2030 for the Demographic Challenge (2022) https://www.euskadi.eus/estrategia-vasca-2030-para-el-reto-demografico/web01-a2lehet/es/	Reflective, interesting document (values, perspectives) Divergent approach between life desires/projects and realities (children, emancipation, etc.)		Adaptive

There are many differences between so many texts, but what they share in relation to how to address rural different and development is more relevant. As we have already seen, first, they lack of thinking carefully on the objectives that they promote and, second, they deploy their strategies using a functional approach focused on technical resolution, which, although manifesting a turn away from the Lisbon visions focused on productivity towards well-being, in line with the more recent European strategies (Dax and Copus, 2022), they do so without changing their anthropological premises based on the *homo-economicus* as a consumer and voter rather than a person with values. A predominant incrementalist and technocratic paradigm prevails, without the need to justify it, almost implicitly, although decisively when giving meaning to the series of strategies.

As described by Syssner (2020) for the Nordic countries, and also in keeping with Spain, as population growth is an ambiguous and malleable topic with a favourable institutional and academic inertia that normalises it, it is easy to project potential benefits and avoid the stigma of weakness and pessimism, converting it into the regulatory framework for rural shrinking. Next, we will discuss its governance implications.

5. Discussion on objectives with respect to depopulation in Spain

Depopulation strategies, on the whole presented as laws, have been abundant in Spain over the last five years (Table 1). They have also been extensive in terms of their contents, becoming a kind of *omnibus bill*, in many cases with more than a hundred articles and addressing all kinds of matters. Within this *horror vacui* many objectives are proposed, although the principal aims, “purpose of the act” are usually distinguished from the secondaries, called simply “objectives” or “strategic objectives”, in other sections. The consensus in terms of the former is broad and can be summarised into two essential objectives: equality in the exercising of rights between rural and urban citizens and territorial cohesion.

Due to this lack of reflection, none of the texts explain what is understood by these goals, which are so important for giving meaning to the series of strategies, or why they have been selected over others. They are set forth hastily, together with an endless amount of measures, proposed in an isolated and functional way but without associating them into a structured text. It is true that equality is an overwhelmingly broad topic, but this should not give rise to its simplification. In fact, the complex notion of spatial injustice (Woods,

2023) is referred to in a very reductionist way, focused on accessibility in terms of distance and time to the basic services, relegating their quality and the effectiveness of their use to a secondary level. This is a very widespread perception but it is inexact. Works on access time and the costs and benefits find that practically all of the villages in Spain are fairly close to these services (Goerlich et al., 2021), with a public financing that is much better than that for urban services (Alloza et al., 2021). If we examine some of the most controversial services related to the welfare state, there is evidence that the academic results of rural schools, healthcare, together with longevity and health, are better in the provinces and among populations belonging to the most depopulated territories⁴.

Cohesion, on the other hand, is usually discussed from more analytical and objective-based perspectives that are usually interdisciplinary, such as those of Regional Economy and Public Economy (which combine knowledge from Geography, Economics, Law, Politics), which does not prevent conceptual divergences or those in public action. When we refer to cohesion policies, whether on a European or national level, the territorial scales are decisive, as are the methodologies and indicators used. Although there is no in-depth reflection on its meanings, in the majority of regional strategies comparisons are made on a municipal level (NUTS5-LAU2) based on indicators in which the demographic and economic trends is fundamental. However, the gap that needs to be reduced is not clear in terms of which well-being dimensions require attention or why. Again, there is technical precision in the tools but an absence of thought about the why.

Therefore, in the two objectives, equality and cohesion, the context within which they are applied and the subjectivity of those who interpret them is relevant. As a result, we believe that if the legislators had explained why they adopted these two goals and which value judgements inspired them, this would not only have been a valuable exercise in ethical terms due to their honesty but also in an intellectual sense, reinforcing their rigour. It would enable a better assessment of their appropriateness, the coherence of the measures and their impacts. However, there are very few governments that make any kind of thinking not only on the objectives sought but also on the series of strategies elaborated and their principal elements. In this respect, the texts of Asturias, La Rioja and the Basque Country provide good explanations of their approaches, although without questioning their goals. They make good diagnoses and propose measures that take into account the

⁴ This was not the case in the past, as during the great rural exodus the worse access to public services provided by the welfare state was decisive for explaining it (Ayuda et al., 2023).

state of the art of the respective topics that they are legislating. However, we can only find arguments that clearly move away from quantitative and incrementalist references in the Basque text, which recognises the importance of the community and values and focuses on the desire of the people as a basic criterion with which to evaluate the policy⁵. On the other hand, the majority of the introductions and preambles justify their legal and political competence in the material, underlying their “exceptional” contribution to the previous legislation, briefly referring to the countless sections of which it is made up, as these strategies de facto have become an all-embracing political programme, “the mother of all the laws”⁶. However, they take a detailed, fragmented, sectoral, top-down approach and lack an integrated and long-term perspective, which is the contrary of what is required in an adaptive strategy (Pinilla and Sáez, 2021; Dax and Copus, 2022; Pinilla, 2023).

In any event, it can be understood from these arguments that if the depopulated areas had a larger population, they would improve the two objectives: equality would increase because more consumers and taxpayers would justify more frequent and closer public and private services; and second, they would reduce the gap with respect to the urban “developed” areas, because they would be more competitive as they would have more human capital and physical capital and wider markets. It is not necessary to justify these reasonings as they can be considered obvious and are reinforced by a rhetoric in the media and politicians that applauds the assertiveness in the analysis (Sáiz and Galletero, 2023). The strategies that have been approved recently in Spain are interpreted from the paradigm associated with the increase in population, with a functional and economicist perception of development. However, given their breadth, contents may also be found supporting a shift towards objectives focused on well-being, which are more in line with the latest European strategies (Dax and Copus, 2022), but in a way that is more rhetoric than effective.

Without going into depth with respect to the so-called secondary objectives, incrementalist connotations can also be observed, which are inevitable due to the large number of goals established pertaining to all of the political spheres. One of the most reiterated, that is, “retain and attract population”, is not understood so much as a consequence of the attractiveness of a small vibrant community to people who value a

⁵ This is something that some researchers and political advisers have been proposing for more than twenty years (Sáez et al., 2001).

⁶ More than two decades ago, Báuena (2002) warned of the risk of an extensive interpretation of depopulation and demography, which would colonise the rest of the policies and condition them.

lifestyle that enables them to expand their capabilities and agency (Nussbaum and Sen, 1993), but as a trigger for greater competitiveness in terms of more productive human capital and a driver of local demand. Also common on this second level and in the *Directrices Generales* (General Guidelines) of the Spanish Government and in the strategies of La Rioja, Madrid, Cantabria, Galicia, are articles and indicators of the success of their policies which explicitly refer to growth in population in order to resolve their demographic challenges.

In any case, none of the texts acknowledge shrinking population as a demographic context in which their strategies are to be developed (Ebne, 2024). This is surprising because as they describe their rural areas to justify specific measures, they acknowledge low fertility and birth rates and widespread ageing and longevity, together with migratory processes. However, it is reasoned as though population growth is the “normal” dynamics from which there has been an exceptional deviation and which can be restored with a good policy. There is no attempt to connect all of these data to generate a clearer conclusion, that the decreasing population is the new phase in the demographic transition and ways to adapt to it must be sought (Sousa and Pinho, 2015). The unrealistic proposals that seek an increase in the rural population disclaim the fact that the currently existing projections consider that the population of the countries in Western Europe will begin to decrease from approximately the year 2030 (United Nations, 2022). Within these conditions, it does not seem possible that the whole of the population will grow significantly and it seems much more probable that rural areas will tend to decrease, in the same way as that of the western countries. In the case of Spain, the population projections published by the National Statistical Institute predict an increase until 2032 and then a stabilisation after that year⁷. As shown in the last few decades in rural Spain, only immigration from abroad has the capacity to modify these projections and lead to a lesser decrease or small increase in the population in these areas (Collantes et al., 2014). However, the reception and integration of immigrants is barely referred to in the strategies proposed (Pinilla, 2023, Conejos et al., 2022)

If at some time of the process of elaborating the strategies a consideration was made of the whys, and the technocratic and functional ways of doing policies and research were overcome, degrowth would emerge as a fundamental aspect. This would lead to very

⁷ Instituto Nacional de Estadística, Proyecciones de población 2022-2072, https://www.ine.es/prensa/pp_2022_2072.pdf

different policies because “the planning principles that work in situations of growth are no longer applicable in times of decline” (Sousa and Pinho, 2015).

Syssner (2022:64) summarises the contents of these adaptive policies as opposed to those that propose an objective of population growth. Despite this, they are not exclusive in the sense that attracting population and being more competitive should no longer be aspirations of a community, because they have a high intrinsic value. If a reality existed in which there was a more dynamic atmosphere that favoured entrepreneurship and a more balanced age structure as a result of the arrival of new residents who wish to be parents, they would be good measures. They are right in themselves, without the need to associate them with an incrementalist end and allocating them a redeeming function of the rural environment. The crucial question would be if these actions are wanted by their protagonist, whether people “reside where they wish” (Pinilla and Sáez, 2021).

Therefore, it is not a question of modifying specific measures but reinterpreting them with other more qualitative meanings based on an alternative paradigm, which assumes the inevitability of rural population decline (or population stagnation) and understands development as a way of improving capacities and agency of individuals and communities. The number of residents would then be a consequence, but never a goal. This new approach should also incorporate other measures that are currently considered much less: organisational innovations in institutions, promoting intermunicipal collaboration; improvements in taxation and budget systems; transparency in the management and evaluation of the impacts; co-responsibility of the local, formal and informal, agents; appreciating knowledge gained from research as well as experience, derived from evidence and comparative analyses, including successes and failures. They would be more related to the how and who than to the what; to the motivations and values associated to social and relational capital than to the prices and budgets linked to tangible inputs, although all play relevant roles. The design of laws and documents will continue to be important but it is necessary to indicate how to implement them, with which arguments and which actors. Assessing the implementation is still a pending subject in Spain, with very little research and institutional analysis. In short, a different way of researching and doing politics.

6. Conclusions

The debates on growth go back a long way. The flag-bearer discipline of growth, Economics, in its beginnings experienced considerable controversy in terms of its virtuality, if the population grew more than the scarce resources it would no longer be viable, and its desirability, as the obsession of having more material things and populating every corner of the planet would give rise to a superficial and uncaring society.

But more than the underlying questions is the way of doing politics and researching. Both of these activities focus on the efficiency of the measures without considering the objective sought, which has given rise to the prevalence of an incrementalist and technocratic approach to combat depopulation, based on competitiveness and a well-being associated with private and public consumption. In fact, the political and academic mainstream on spatial, urban and rural development maintains demographic growth as a goal that gives meaning to its policies and research, but without the need to make hardly any effort to reason its predominance.

This dominance is surprising because the reality is very different. Demographic shrinkage is no longer only a situation of peripheral rural areas that cannot adapt to the structural changes of modern economies but has been affecting urban areas for decades and in the not so distant future it will be the normal situation in the majority of developed countries. However, planning is still conducted as if growth is an obvious reality, simply because it is believed to be as such or it is appropriate to seem that way and that the reality a falsehood. The intellectual nudity of leaders in academia and rural policies is obvious and their confusion in the search for answers where they cannot find them is surprising (Hollander et al. 2009).

In our opinion, another interdisciplinary form of researching with no fear of considering subjective elements and tackling the uncomfortable questions about the meaning of what is studied should be adopted. We should contemplate whether our work really generates additional knowledge and whether it contributes to improving the social debate, inspiring political and strategic improvements.

In this change of paradigm, when policies and strategies are elaborated, the level of thinking should be higher, particularly in demanding evidence on what is proposed, knowing that it is provisional and does not justify either a dogmatic or disdainful tones. Politicians and policymakers should be willing to be convinced and permanently open to

new knowledge. This knowledge is not only drawn from academic research but also from lived experiences and that transmitted through traditions. In many of the strategies recently approved in Spain, the time dedicated to deep discussion has been scarce and those based on well-founded arguments have continued to have the objective of increasing population. Cohesion and equity would be immediate consequences of this. Moreover, a real horizon is not used, that of less inhabitants. In this case, the way of addressing services and promoting competitiveness would be very different, not necessarily less developed, at least with respect to capacities and agency.

Therefore, in parliamentary debates and in the Spanish press, the politicians who have promoted these strategies base their arguments on the evolution of the people registered in census. There is hardly any critical reading of the data, nor whether this larger population can be maintained in the future, nor what is most important, whether people are happier if there are more. These questions do not have to be answered but ought to be asked by politicians and researchers.

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