Rural gap, socio-economic processes and regional disparities in Spain

Throughout the 20th century, different generations of rural modernisation policies aimed at integrating these regions into national economies through the creation of connection infrastructures (roads, telephony, trains, bus lines). However, the criticism of the welfare state in favour of the rationality of the market under the neoliberal paradigm led from the 1980s onwards to the privatisation and concentration of many rural services. The difficulties for implementing efficient public transportation systems in sparsely populated areas and its gradual erosion because of the rationalisation of rural services have made the car a main, and frequently exclusive, resource to achieve accessibility.

This, however, also has become the principal factor in the erosion of public transport, while car dependence creates new forms of exclusion and social inequality. The requirements for the use of a car, such as driver’s license, vehicle ownership, maintenance costs and skill, and safety, can also aggravate the existing inequalities between rural and urban areas.

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Behind the Research

Prof Camarero and Prof Oliva study the challenges faced by rural areas, with a focus on mobility and social inequalities.

Detail

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Luis Camarero is Professor of Sociology and Head of the Theory, Methodology and Social Change Department (National Distance Education University, Madrid). He has conducted several research projects on the demographic and socioeconomic transformations of southern European rural areas. He is author of several books and articles focusing on social sustainability in rural areas and on the new social inequalities related both to gender issues and mobility.

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References


Personal Response

What inspired you to conduct this research?

Our research was inspired by the observation that the cumulative effect of demographic, economic, geographic and accessibility issues resulted in vicious cycles of decline in many rural areas. This became much more evident after the crisis. We thought it was necessary to look more closely into the interrelated causes and effects of these processes. The rural-urban gap is a global phenomenon repeated with slight variations in different cultural and social contexts. For this reason, it would need to be theorised from a more sociological perspective than an economic development view.

Could you give an example of a specific intervention on a policy level based on your research to tackle the rural gap?

Sectoral policies and regional strategies have long been developed in different countries, such as non-conventional transport systems – local social buses and car sharing, on-demand transport, buses for easy-to-access medical services to people in rural areas; mobile banking services – and policies to avoid youth decapitalisation. However, sectoral policies fail to address the rural gap as a whole and we need to consider the issue from a broader approach, such as rural proofing.

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whose users are least likely to have access to their own private transport” (2005, p. 104). As a result, some groups become dependent and vulnerable because of the lack of autonomy, and still other face serious risks of discrimination because of the strong interconnections between physical mobility and social mobility in modern society. Spatial movement can be indeed seen as a vehicle for transformation and when it is constrained, people’s options to realise certain projects and plans are limited. From this perspective, they are sedentary in place, which curtails their life choices/perspectives.

While the depopulation of inland areas of Spain leads to erosion of welfare services, it has other social repercussions. In practice they are contingent on the region, as they become both exercised and enacted upon registration in a place.

Not all territories and places have the same capabilities or offer the same resources for equal problems. One of the ways to tackle these social inequalities resulting from the rural gap, as researchers suggest, can be provided by means of technological improvements. For example, easy high-speed internet access improves the local attractiveness and new forms of mobility (as a service, on-demand, shared), thereby increasing the quality of rural life. However, a socio-technical configuration of different maps of accessibilities and provision of services may give rise to smart or lagging regions, rural and urban, and the idea is that all political rights acquired as citizens are universal, in practice they are contingent on the region, as they become both exercised and enacted upon registration in a place.

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 Roncal Valley, Spanish Pyrenees.