8. The impact of foreign immigrants on the revitalization of rural areas in Spain

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INTRODUCTION

In the second half of the twentieth century, especially until the early 1980s, Spanish rural and mountain areas experienced a massive decline in population due to out-migration. The main factors were agricultural mechanization, work opportunities in rapidly industrializing areas boosted by the development plans launched at the end of the Franco period (1959–1975), and the establishment of the welfare state providing better access to health, social, and educational services in urban areas (Bayona-i-Carrasco and Gil-Alonso 2013; Lardiés-Bosque 2018a). While some commuted weekly or relocated permanently to big cities and their growing urban fringes, others emigrated to former colonies in South America and later to other European countries (Oliva 2010).

However, from the 1990s, in parallel with out-migration, the arrival of a foreign population in Spain has been increasingly relevant and has had a major impact on its social structure (Sampedro and Camarero 2018). Although most of the research about the immigration of foreigners in Spain has focused on metropolitan and large urban areas, studies have recently increasingly addressed the arrival and characteristics of foreign immigrants in rural areas (Morén-Alegret and Solana 2004).

A process of repopulation then started in some rural areas (Hoggart 1997; Soronellas-Masdeu, Bodoque-Puerta and Torrens-Bonet 2014), which was supported by EU accession, the related economic boom, and post-productivist economic alternatives: organic farming, tourism (second homes), construction, or jobs in public administration, and a better supply of infrastructure such as the internet, which enabled teleworking (Bayona-i-Carrasco and Gil-Alonso 2013; Oliveau et al. 2019). Apart from urban residents and re-migrants moving to the countryside for weekends, holidays, or permanently, foreigners...
The impact of foreign immigrants on the revitalization of rural areas in Spain also started to arrive (Oliva 2010; Bayona-i-Carrasco and Gil Alonso 2013; Lardiés-Bosque 2018b).

The accelerated arrival of immigrants in rural areas mainly from the 2000s characterized that decade as the ‘golden age of immigration’ (Lardiés-Bosque 2018b), a phenomenon associated with neoliberalization policies in the real estate sector. Many rural communities and their mayors wished to participate in urban development with the aid of urban developers. Thereafter, non-economic factors linked with a better lifestyle became important for immigrants’ arrival and choice of location in Spain (Alamá-Sabater, Alguacil and Serafí Bernat-Martí 2017).

However, the 2008 economic crisis interrupted this development, followed by a decrease after 2013 (Collantes et al. 2014; Lardiés-Bosque 2018b; Oliverau et al. 2019). During the crisis between 2008 and 2014 many immigrants stopped arriving and left rural areas. In contrast, unemployed young Spaniards began to commute to cities or left Spain for Northern Europe (Lardiés-Bosque 2018a). After the Lehman Brothers crisis immigrant numbers recovered from 2015 until the COVID-19 crisis, when they again declined.

The main consequence of rural emigration and the growth of urban areas has been the significant territorial imbalances generated in the country, with many areas having very low population densities (Gobierno de España 2020). Concern about depopulation and the lack of population has become a current issue in Spain that both academia and institutions have addressed. Immigration and actions to settle the new population began to be seen as a solution for reviving villages and towns and tackling sociodemographic and territorial imbalances between urban–metropolitan–coastal areas and rural–inland areas (Camarero, Sampedro and Oliva 2012; Collantes et al. 2014). Numerous initiatives have since been launched to curb depopulation and attract immigrant populations to rejuvenate rural areas (Coto Sauras 2019; Lardiés-Bosque 2018a). Authors like González-Torres (2016) have also suggested the revival of villages and towns with refugees, drawing on three places in some provinces.

In this chapter we conduct a review of the main works on this subject. We also present some general statistical data on the evolution of the foreign population in rural areas in Spain, mainly between 2002 and 2020, its current distribution, and some of its sociodemographic and economic characteristics in relation to the labour market in which it is integrated. We use the National Statistics Institute’s (INE) continuous Population Register (Padrón Continuo de Población) and the Economically Active Population Survey (EPAS). This will enable a better understanding of immigrants’ contribution to rural areas.

The work has been conducted in the context of the H2020 MATILDE research project, which has analysed the Aragón region in more detail. Aragón is one of the 17 autonomous Spanish communities, with problems of depopulation and many demographically empty areas (European Union 2016); more-
Assessing the social impact of immigration in Europe

over, the arrival of immigrants affords a good example of the demographic revitalization of its rural areas. We will therefore offer some information about this Spanish region to compare the problems at different territorial scales. The chapter ends with a discussion of the results and some conclusions.

DEPOPULATION AND THE DEMOGRAPHIC CHALLENGE IN SPAIN

Spain has experienced significant demographic growth. Between 2002 and 2020 its population increased from 41.8 to 47.5 million (Table 8.1). However, rural areas have experienced depopulation in the last three or four decades, which combined with their demographic situation, has become a major challenge in which several problems are intertwined: the emigration of the young population, decline in the birth rate, ageing, and low demographic density (Bandrés and Azón 2021; FEMP 2017).

The exodus of the rural population between approximately 1950 and 1980 had serious consequences for the maintenance of the rural population. During the decade between 2000 and 2010 many rural areas, especially inland rural areas, saw a reversal of a depopulation that had lasted decades (Esparcia 2002; García Coll and Sánchez 2005; Collantes et al. 2014). Nine of the 17 Autonomous Communities experienced depopulation between 2010 and 2019.

However, depopulation is very evident at the municipal level: of the 8,131 municipalities in Spain, 62.7 per cent experienced depopulation between 2001 and 2011, and 76.6 per cent between 2011 and 2019 (INE). Of Spanish municipalities 83.1 per cent had fewer than 5,000 inhabitants in 2021, and 410,000 fewer inhabitants lived in them than a decade earlier. Only 2.9 per cent of the Spanish population lived in municipalities with fewer than 1,000 inhabitants. Similarly, the populations of 29 of the 51 Spanish provincial capitals have declined in the last decade.

According to population density, 48.3 per cent of Spanish municipalities had a density of fewer than 12.5 inhabitants/km² in 2020. Almost 9 million inhabitants (19.2%) are more than 65 years old, and this is expected to be around 30 per cent in 2030 (INE). However, ageing is greater in rural municipalities: 33 per cent of the population are over 65 in municipalities with fewer than 1,000 inhabitants.

The main challenge to rural areas’ survival is not only depopulation (emigration) but the lack of demographic regeneration and low fertility and birth rates (Bandrés and Azón 2021). The intense exodus from rural areas has caused very selective depopulation in composition by age group and sex, which has generated important imbalances in the demographic structure. The rural exodus has emptied rural areas of the young, and this is combined with the lack of fertility and the general lack of births, leading to a deficit of
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of municipality</th>
<th>Municipality size</th>
<th>2002</th>
<th></th>
<th>2020</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Total Population</td>
<td>Foreigners</td>
<td>TCNs</td>
<td>Total Population</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Volume</strong></td>
<td>Rural</td>
<td>&lt; 2,000 inhabitants</td>
<td>2,975,840</td>
<td>68,548</td>
<td>47,300</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Intermediate</td>
<td>2,000–10,000 inhab.</td>
<td>6,671,269</td>
<td>232,532</td>
<td>154,886</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Urban</td>
<td>&gt; 10,000 inhab.</td>
<td>32,190,785</td>
<td>1,676,442</td>
<td>1,285,637</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Total</td>
<td></td>
<td>41,837,894</td>
<td>1,977,522</td>
<td>1,487,823</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Percentages</strong></td>
<td>Rural</td>
<td>&lt; 2,000 inhabitants</td>
<td>7.1</td>
<td>3.5</td>
<td>3.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Intermediate</td>
<td>2,000–10,000 inhab.</td>
<td>15.9</td>
<td>11.8</td>
<td>10.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Urban</td>
<td>&gt; 10,000 inhab.</td>
<td>76.9</td>
<td>84.8</td>
<td>86.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Total</td>
<td></td>
<td>100.0</td>
<td>100.0</td>
<td>100.0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Data source:* Municipal Register of Inhabitants, INE.
young people to maintain and/or revitalize these areas (Bayona-i-Carrasco and Gil-Alonso 2013; Camarero 2020). There are therefore scarcely any children in many areas of inland Spain, very few young people, and a large elderly population: more than 28 per cent of the population of many rural inland areas are more than 65 years of age (Camarero et al. 2009).

The low fertility and birth rate is therefore a problem throughout the country, and especially in rural areas. In most rural areas the population is ‘biologically dead’ due to the emigration of young people and the permanence of the elderly population (Lardiés-Bosque 2018b). In recent decades the country has had negative natural growth, and there are more deaths than births in 77.7 per cent of municipalities. Demographic projections point to a scenario in which the population decline can be sustained if the internal and external dynamic variables do not change (FEMP 2017).

The depopulation of rural areas (the ‘empty Spain’ [España vacía]) and the demographic problem are not only of academic concern but have generated a major official, political, and academic debate; for example, various proposals attempt to turn immigrants (and refugees) into settlers of these spaces. This issue has generated national interest with the creation of the current Ministry for the Ecological Transition and the Demographic Challenge, and within it the General Secretariat for the Demographic Challenge, where the General Directorate of Policies against Depopulation is based. Currently, the issues of depopulation and the demographic challenge are fully present in the news and media and official and academic reports. Many municipalities and public institutions have developed and financed projects for the settlement of the population in rural areas and small municipalities, in which immigrants are of outstanding importance. In this context the arrival of foreign immigrants is usually considered an opportunity for the demographic revitalization of rural areas (Camarero and Sampedro 2019) as their representation has grown.

FOREIGN IMMIGRANTS IN RURAL SPAIN AND THE ROLE OF DEMOGRAPHIC REVITALIZATION

Aware of the worrying demographic and economic situation in most rural areas in Spain, in this section we analyse the role the increase in foreign immigrants may play in their revitalization. The immigration process in Spain has been fundamentally characterized by its speed and intensity and the impact this has had on Spanish society (Arango 2012) with all its implications – many still unexplored. Immigration has therefore become one of the main factors of the transformation of the Spanish social and population structure (Lacomba et al. 2021). There were 314,824 foreign immigrants in 1998, 0.79 per cent of the Spanish population, but this figure increased to 5.5 million in 2022, 11.6 per cent (INE). The greatest increase has occurred since 2002, when there
were already 1.9 million foreigners, 4.48 per cent of the population (Table 8.1). Having traditionally been a country of emigration, within a decade Spain became a significantly receiving country like France or Germany (Arango 2012).

The immigrant population is concentrated in the large cities and main metropolitan areas, but the phenomenon has significantly affected rural areas due to immigrants’ presence in economic sectors like agriculture, construction, and domestic services and care (Mendoza 2003). For example, 3.4 per cent of foreigners – and 2.3 per cent of TCNs – in Spain lived in rural municipalities (< 2,000 inhab.) in 2020, while 5.6 per cent of the total population lived in them. This means the concentration of foreigners in urban municipalities (> 10,000 inhab.) is percentagewise higher (Table 8.1).

However, these figures vary by province and territory. Figure 8.1 shows the weight of the foreign population in the total population in the smallest municipalities (< 2,000 inhab.). For example, this figure was 12.1 per cent in Spain in 2011; it was higher in the Mediterranean coastal provinces, on the islands, and in the Community of Madrid. The example of the three provinces of Aragón also stands out. Here, the presence of the foreign population in rural areas in 2020 was much higher than the Spanish average, and 12.8 per cent of foreigners lived in the smallest municipalities (Table 8.1); the concentration of TCNs in rural municipalities is also very high in Aragón (15.8% of the total). Neither EU foreign citizens nor third-country nationals are equally distributed over the country (Oliveau et al. 2019), and the reduced presence of immigrants and foreigners characterizes small municipalities and rural areas, especially in the north and west of the country (Oliva 2010). In contrast, the provinces that offer more employment in agriculture and tourism, the main economic sectors for the integration of immigrants, are those that register the highest figures (Figure 8.1).

In the theoretical context of new post-productive rurality the arrival of foreign immigrants occurs in parallel with the phenomenon of counter-urbanization and diverse population flows away from productive motivations (lifestyle migrants in rural areas); in a globalized and transnationalized world all these new flows contribute to social diversity and the diversification of the traditional composition of rural areas, traditionally characterized as homogeneous (Halfacree 2008).

Immigrants arriving in rural Spanish areas differ greatly from the foreign residents who in previous decades settled in coastal Mediterranean areas, the autonomous island communities of the Balearic and Canary Islands, some mountain areas, or inland areas of the peninsula especially attractive to tourists (Camarero and Sampedro 2019). Those immigrants and residents who arrived during the 1970s and 1980s were generally retirees from central and northern Europe, who settled in areas where they had previously holidayed. Retirement
migrations of elderly people who live with a family and have a medium or high socioeconomic level in relation to the local population continue.

Meanwhile, the new immigrants who have arrived since the 1990s and 2000s have different profiles. They generally migrate for labour and come from Africa, Latin America, and Eastern Europe, like those who have arrived in other southern European countries. The new labour immigration protagonists are younger. They generally travel without their family and have a lower economic position than the local population, thus best reflecting the status of those called ‘immigrants’ in Spain (Sampedro 2012). This immigration is differentiated by the migrants’ geographical and cultural diversity: they sometimes come from rural areas in their countries of origin. Their higher rate of unemployment than the native population’s is also noteworthy, as is the considerable level of informal employment (Mendoza 2003; Sampedro and Camarero 2016).

Arroyo et al. (2014) state that ‘it is obvious that the arrival of foreigners brings a change in the volume and structure of the total population residing in Spain’, but ‘they not only increase the volume, but also enter into the
demographic dynamics, which they modify through their births, deaths, and migration’ (2014, 26). Not only is the population weight acquired by immigration itself important; no less important are its incidence in sociodemographic dynamics, presence in the territory, and insertion into family structures. Immigration has reversed the decline of Spain’s population, contributed to its rejuvenation, compensated for the loss of inhabitants in some areas, and brought greater diversity to families and households (Lacomba et al. 2021).

In addition to the strictly demographic problem the arrival of immigrants has affected the territory, modifying the local population’s dynamics. As early as the 1990s Buller and Hoggart (1994) pointed out that foreigners were beginning to play an increasingly important direct or indirect role in rural areas’ evolution. The general youthfulness of immigrants in Spain has therefore usually been seen as an opportunity to (re)populate many areas, especially rural areas and municipalities with a small population.

The population density of the region of Aragón was 28.2 inhabitants/km² in 2017, one of the lowest in the EU. It is the Spanish region with the fourth lowest population density – and the first if Zaragoza, the most populated city, is not considered. Zaragoza accounts for more than 56 per cent of the regional population. According to the Economic and Social Council of Aragón report (CESA 2019) some 86 municipalities (of a total of 731) with fewer than 100 inhabitants in Aragón have already entered what is called a ‘demographically terminal’ cycle. This situation not only affects the smaller municipalities; 184 (25.2%) with more than 1,000 inhabitants are also affected.

The region has been very attractive for foreign immigrants since the mid-1990s. Between 2002 and 2020 their number increased from 43,973 to 162,048 (Municipal Register of Inhabitants, INE). Although the region’s native population was 1.1 million in 2002, it was also 1.1 million in 2022; however, the total population increased from 1.1 to 1.3 million in the same period. The population increase is therefore the result of the arrival of foreigners; the region has had negative natural growth for years.

In 2020 12.2 per cent of the region’s population were nationals of, and almost 14.7 per cent were born in, another country. Of the total foreign population, 43.2 per cent came from Africa, and 41.3 per cent from America (mostly from Latin American countries); moreover, 58.9 per cent of foreigners came from countries outside the European Union, representing 7.2 per cent of the region’s population. Currently, this group consists mainly of people of the following nationalities: Morocco; Colombia; Ecuador; other non-EU European countries; and Venezuela.

In 2020 12.8 per cent of the region’s immigrants lived in small municipalities (< 2,000 inhab.), 16.7 per cent lived in intermediate municipalities (2,000–10,000 inhab.), and 70.5 per cent were concentrated in urban municipalities (> 10,000 inhab.). Their presence in rural areas is therefore important;
in many municipalities they can reach between 16 and 20 per cent of the total population, although the majority is concentrated in urban areas. In demographic terms the foreign population thus plays a fundamental role, because they are mainly concentrated in intermediate towns of between 5,000 and 10,000 inhabitants (Lardiés-Bosque and del Olmo-Vicén 2021a), where there are better labour opportunities and access to services (transport, education, health), more social life, and greater availability of housing. People prefer these intermediate towns to very small villages with fewer services and less accessibility.

Concerning demographic characteristics, 73.9 per cent of the foreign population in Aragón were under 45 years of age in 2020, and 81.0 per cent were of working age. Moreover, the average age of the native population was 46.5, while that of people of foreign origin was 33.9 (CC.OO. 2021). Testimonies obtained during the MATILDE project’s fieldwork and other official information give an idea of the foreign population’s contribution to the revitalization of rural areas from the demographic and economic perspectives. This is also noticeable in the region’s public schools, where foreign students represented 13.8 per cent of the total in 2019, although in some they represented up to 20 per cent (CESA 2020). The arrival of families from Latin America and to a lesser extent the sub-Saharan countries or as a result of the reunification of families from the Maghreb has therefore made it possible to increase the number of school places, conciliation services, and activities related to intercultural coexistence in many municipalities.

This example of foreigners’ contribution at the regional scale reinforces the importance of the demographic and economic role foreign immigrants play in rural areas. We next examine some of that role’s economic and labour characteristics.

Living and Working in Rural Areas: From the Impact to the Difficulties

Foreign workers held 12.6 per cent of jobs in Spain in 2019 according to the INE (Table 8.2). They were overrepresented in the primary sector (in agriculture they occupied 22.3% of these jobs) and in construction (17.2%). They were also important in services (12.3%).

But what is the main reason for the arrival and settlement of foreigners in rural areas? The answer may lie in the analysis of the jobs they hold. There are many studies of immigrants’ participation in industrialized agriculture in Spain (Pedreño Cánovas, de Castro Pericacho and Gadea Montesinos 2015). In Andalusia in the south of the country intensive agriculture employs many foreign workers, mainly Moroccans, and especially women, in the cultivation of strawberries, olives, and tomatoes, and on tobacco plantations or in Mediterranean orchards. In northern and inland agricultural areas there
Table 8.2  The employed by economic sector and nationality in Spain, 2019

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Nationality of employed</th>
<th>Agriculture (%)</th>
<th>Industry (%)</th>
<th>Construction (%)</th>
<th>Services (%)</th>
<th>Total</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Spanish (1)</td>
<td>77.7</td>
<td>91.1</td>
<td>82.8</td>
<td>87.7</td>
<td>16,705,500</td>
<td>87.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Foreign (2)</td>
<td>22.3</td>
<td>8.9</td>
<td>17.2</td>
<td>12.3</td>
<td>2,400,100</td>
<td>12.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EU</td>
<td>7.5</td>
<td>4.4</td>
<td>6.8</td>
<td>4.7</td>
<td>944,300</td>
<td>4.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non-EU (Europe)</td>
<td>0.8</td>
<td>0.4</td>
<td>1.5</td>
<td>0.8</td>
<td>151,000</td>
<td>0.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Latin America</td>
<td>3.4</td>
<td>1.8</td>
<td>5.3</td>
<td>4.0</td>
<td>719,800</td>
<td>3.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rest of the world</td>
<td>14.8</td>
<td>2.3</td>
<td>3.6</td>
<td>2.7</td>
<td>585,000</td>
<td>3.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TCNs</td>
<td>10.7</td>
<td>4.5</td>
<td>10.4</td>
<td>7.6</td>
<td>1,455,800</td>
<td>7.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TOTAL (1 + 2)</td>
<td>100.0</td>
<td>100.0</td>
<td>100.0</td>
<td>100.0</td>
<td>19,105,600</td>
<td>100.0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Data source: Economically Active Population Survey, INE.
are high concentrations working with fruit or irrigated crops. Many of these workers are temporary (Morén-Alegret and Solana 2004).

Construction is another important sector for working migrants in rural areas, where about a third of all men are employed, often temporarily (Camarero, Sampedro and Oliva 2012). Lower housing prices and following the established commuting patterns of Spaniards in the construction sector (Oliva 2010) meant Eastern Europeans and Moroccans settled in villages and small towns 150 kms from Madrid, outside Barcelona, or in the hinterland of the Costa Blanca or Mallorca (Morén-Alegret 2008). They commuted either to urban centres or rural areas where second homes were being built (Camarero, Sampedro and Oliva 2012; Lardiés-Bosque 2018b). When the economic and construction boom ended in 2008, many continued to work in agriculture (Camarero, Sampedro and Oliva 2013) or left rural areas (Lardiés-Bosque 2018b).

Catering and tourism, with their spatial focus on coasts and inland tourist areas, have offered workplaces for foreigners, especially Africans, Europeans, and Latin Americans. Latin Americans predominate in adventure tourism in Pyrenean villages (Bayona-i-Carrasco and Gil Alonso 2013; Soronellas-Masdeu, Bodoque-Puerta and Torrens-Bonet 2014). Wholesale (e.g. Chinese, Senegalese), courier and service delivery (Senegalese), and the sale of second-hand and electronic equipment, jewellery, and flowers (Pakistani) are other service sectors with a presence of foreigners and TCNs. Domestic work, including (live-in) caregiving, has become another sector that especially attracts foreign women (Camarero, Sampedro and Oliva 2012; Díaz-Gorfinkiel and Martínez-Buján 2018; for Peruvians see Escrivá 2003). Caribbean and Latin American women come mainly from the urban or metropolitan areas of their countries. Some even have higher education and often arrive without family and children, who are left behind at least for a few years (Camarero, Sampedro and Oliva 2012; Soronellas-Masdeu, Bodoque-Puerta and Torrens-Bonet 2014). Finally, women from Moroccan or Algerian cities are drawn to Spain by family ties – for example, with the aid of a husband or brother. If workplaces are in very mountainous areas with poor communications, women workers do not live onsite, preferring to live in more accessible towns or villages. However, rural areas are considered to have certain advantages like a cheaper cost of living, making it easier to save or become known as a good worker in the village. Although domestic services provide a fixed and stable income, and only 34 per cent are on temporary contracts (Camarero, Sampedro and Oliva 2012), a considerable number of immigrants use such work to obtain information and accumulate financial resources, skills, and contacts to move on to cities and better paid occupations (Collantes et al. 2014).

In the region of Aragón, as in other rural areas of Spain, foreign workers also endure poorer working conditions and lower wages, and they have suf-
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fered most during the COVID-19 crisis. Temporality, part-time work, and less renewal characterize the hiring of foreigners. The temporary employment rate among immigrants is 39.5 per cent, compared to an average of 24.1 per cent in Aragón. This gap of 15.4 percentage points (CC.OO. 2021) may be related to their working in jobs offering less social mobility.

Of the 145,562 new contracts in 2020 foreign workers accounted for 32.4 per cent of those affiliated with the agricultural sector, 44.7 per cent of domestic workers, 14.5 per cent of workers in the food industry, and 16.5 per cent of workers in land transport (CC.OO. 2021). By economic sector the services sector accounted for 41.9 per cent of the total, followed by agriculture (33.5%), industry (18.7%), and construction (5.8%). Two thirds of the contracts signed by foreigners were concentrated in the following seven economic activities:

1. Agriculture, livestock, hunting, and related services (35.1%).
2. Food and beverage services (10.2%).
3. Wholesale trade and trade intermediaries, except motor vehicles and motorcycles (5.1%).
4. Food industry (4.9%).
5. Building services and gardening (4.3%).
6. Land and pipeline transport (2.7%).
7. Storage and transport-related activities (2.5%).

Sub-Saharan Africans have settled in some comarcas to work as unskilled labour in the fields and in fruit harvesting. These immigrants from rural Africa have entered the secondary labour market in a segmented labour structure (Ródenas 2016). Others have subsequently worked in industry (animal slaughterhouses, cleaning) or in unskilled but relatively stable jobs in industries that previously lacked manpower. This has allowed them to survive the economic crisis and the COVID-19 pandemic. Having worked as agricultural seasonal workers, they have become wage earners in industries that are relatively stable and have a certain legal balance. They have also settled in urban areas and brought in their wives and families. This demographic impact has resulted in women gaining employment opportunities through emigration.

Most foreign workers work as wage earners, although there are also entrepreneurs, generally in restaurants (where many Latin Americans work) or small businesses (Chinese). Many of these businesses are in the service sector and usually occupy market niches, so their impact on the region’s economic development is residual. Although many migrant entrepreneurial initiatives take place in the fields of micro-enterprises and commerce, others are becoming more common. According to the OPI (Permanent Immigration Observatory) home service, transport, cleaning, and other companies offer services traditionally unavailable in rural areas. The entrepreneurial spirit of
immigrants has thus contributed to the integration their lives with those of the inhabitants of cities and towns, affording them access to services that were not previously offered in these areas. This population therefore has a positive impact on economic activity, employment, and occupations, undertaking work the native population is reluctant to do and contributing to demographic revitalization.

An explanation of foreigners’ arrival and settlement in rural areas may be that they find jobs in economic sectors and branches the native population is frequently reluctant to enter (Lardiés-Bosque and del Olmo-Vicén 2021b). They are generally poorly paid temporary agricultural jobs that require constant spatial mobility and the displacement of men from their families. Other sectors in rural areas with large numbers of foreign workers are restaurants and tourism businesses, where they work as waiters, personal and domestic care assistants, cleaners, and manual workers in industry or transport (CESA 2020). The data from the INE show that 30 per cent of foreign workers in Spain were engaged in unskilled occupations in 2018, and 29.3 per cent worked in catering, personal, security, and sales services (which need few qualifications). In some groups the inability to speak Spanish and poor training limit job placement and lock workers in low-skilled jobs.

Such poorly paid, temporary, and arduous jobs mean the rooting and settlement of this population in rural areas are difficult and unstable, and these factors limit their stability and demographic impact. All this is associated with the high level of exclusion and marginalization foreign immigrants suffer in certain contexts (Lozano 2015).

DISCUSSION

In this chapter we have attempted to analyse the presence and evolution of the foreign population in Spanish rural areas. We have investigated the population’s economic and territorial characteristics to evaluate its contribution to the revitalization of these areas. We have observed that some areas affected by depopulation in Spain welcome new foreign residents. From a demographic perspective the findings from the literature show that recent immigration to rural areas has significantly contributed to reducing depopulation (Collantes et al. 2014; Roquer and Blay 2008; Sampedro and Camarero 2018), helping generate a positive impact (Esparcia 2002). The population trend has even been reversed in some rural areas that have begun not only to retain but also gain residents after decades of steady decline (Collantes et al. 2014; Lozano 2015).

Our analysis shows immigrants are valued for the work they do, especially in rural areas where many positions would remain vacant because of the declining workforce (Camarero, Sampedro and Oliva 2013). Besides, the positive impact the reception of immigrants has had on the rejuvenation and
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growth of the population through the increase in the birth rate, especially in rural areas, is unquestionable (Collantes et al. 2014). The effects of immigration on the recovery of fertility rates were highlighted as very positive a decade ago (Cebrián et al. 2007), based on immigrant women’s very different reproductive patterns. However, time has shown that their fertility drops to the level of native women after a few years in the country, so this effect is largely limited to the arrival phase. Among the less positive effects it has also been observed that the arrival of immigrants has contributed to the masculinization of rural areas, as migration flows are mainly made up of men (Camarero et al. 2009). Family reunifications may attenuate this, presenting different patterns and logics in the different national groups (Sampedro 2012).

The ability to retain this population in the medium and long term and its full integration into local life is a basic issue for these rural areas’ social sustainability. However, the demographic impact of immigration is a complex phenomenon and has different dimensions. The research carried out thus far suggests this is associated with the characteristics of both rural villages and their new residents (Camarero 2020; Camarero, Sampedro and Oliva 2013). Only regions with certain characteristics offer the ideal conditions for the establishment of a foreign population. Tourist areas are a clear example. They have benefited significantly from this rural renaissance (Bayona-i-Carrasco and Gil-Alonso 2013). Moreover, the foreign population is concentrated in medium-sized municipalities – towns with more diversified economies, a greater supply of housing, good communications, and better public services, making the abandonment of smaller and isolated villages more evident (Goerlich, Maudos and Mollá 2021).

In the patterns of territorial settlement and models of labour insertion and family migration strategies, the role rural areas play in migration projects assumes special importance. Many studies underline that the immigrant population plays an important role not only in highly seasonal agricultural jobs but in many other jobs linked to agribusiness, commerce, or local services, so they are the protagonists of business initiatives that revitalize village life (Soronellas-Masdeu, Bodoque-Puerta and Torrens-Bonet 2014). However, the abandonment of agriculture and rural areas and the social progress of immigrants explains the desire for mobility and social progress that accompanies all migration projects (Pedreño and Riquelme 2006). In many cases the analysis of foreign immigrants’ residential and occupational mobility suggests that rural areas and agricultural work may only be a station on the path to better jobs in urban areas (Camarero, Sampedro and Oliva 2013). Rural areas linked to sectors such as agriculture, which are unattractive for the local population and have a high level of informality, may only be the first stage in the migration trajectory.
Related to this, the balance between 2002 and 2020 suggests that the arrival and settlement of foreigners has grown in cycles of economic growth but decreases in phases of crisis. In the latter (between 2008 and 2014 and between 2020 and 2021 with the COVID-19 crisis) the decline in the rural population has also been evident among foreigners. Between 2008 and 2014 there was a drastic reduction in the foreign population’s migration flows, reaching negative values at the end of the period. The impact of the crisis was reflected in the decrease in arrivals of new immigrants and in the departure of those who could not retain or gain employment and ran out of the public aid or family support that allowed them to withstand financial challenges (Torres Perez 2014).

CONCLUSION

The presence of foreign workers in many rural Spanish municipalities has been considered the last chance to prevent the disappearance of many small towns. However, it is necessary to consider the extent to which and how this arrival of immigrants can maintain demographic rural areas, which ones, and if it can correct the profound demographic imbalances affecting many of them. The selection of areas requiring revitalization is important because not all rural areas will receive enough immigrants. Medium-sized towns are therefore perhaps the best option for any revitalization strategy.

In considering the characteristics of the chosen destinations, work-related initiatives should allow for the possibility that agriculture may not be the preferred sector for immigrants once they begin to integrate into the receiving society (Camarero, Sampedro and Oliva 2012; Morén-Alegret and Solana 2004). Schemes should be designed, perhaps locally, to provide training and recognize professional skills to match demand from employers and promote self-employment in other sectors, with a particular focus on women (Collantes et al. 2014). Second, new or existing measures should deepen integration and facilitate the establishment of ties with host areas. These would include actions to promote family regrouping and settlement, ensure access to housing and healthcare, and channel the attitudes of locals (for example, in informal employment relationships; see also Camarero et al. 2009; Saéz, Ayuda and Pinilla 2016).

To improve rural living conditions, public administrations attempt to ensure full equality in the quality of public services and social services, with necessary adaptations based on their territorial characteristics. The lack of specific services, lower quality, and difficulty of access directly affect the perception of the rural population’s quality of life, constituting another reason for the abandonment of rural areas. The Federación Española de Municipios y Provincias (FEMP) has therefore recommended the planning of the reception and integration of the foreign population, with a programme of subsidies for the local...
entities involved, in collaboration with NGOs and with the active participation of the public services of the different autonomous communities.

All the above should be developed in a context in which rural areas’ depopulation and demographic revitalization have become important topics in the political debate and for Spanish public administration. Many initiatives and actions address the issue at different administrative levels (national, regional, and municipal). Overlaps emerge, and there is little clarity about which territories should be prioritized for revitalization, how, and with which population. The differences in North–South development will continue to ensure the arrival of foreign populations, whose role in rural areas will continue to be necessary.

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