

Spain

Immigration to revive depopulated rural areas

María Coto Sauras¹



Photos: Cepaim

One of the **main challenges** facing large areas of rural Spain is the **accelerated process of depopulation**. Demographic decline in such areas, where the birth rate is nearly zero and people especially the young and women are migrating to other regions, is accompanied by a lack of economic dynamism and limited access to services and infrastructures. As a result, largely male and ageing populations find themselves in a **dangerous vicious circle** that compromises, in many cases, their survival.

¹Article based on the Final Degree in Sociology, "*Inmigración en zonas rurales en proceso de despoblación: factores de éxito y dificultades en el proceso de integración*", author: María Coto Sauras; professor: Carmen Lozano-Cabedo. Universidad Nacional de Educación a Distancia (UNED). The author would like to thank the Cepaim Foundation team for their information and collaboration, especially Sali Guntín Ubierno and María García Tarancón.

It is not a recent phenomenon, but one that has been taking place in Spain since the middle of the last century. But a particularly critical point has been reached and the challenge of depopulation has acquired a **progressive prominence in the political and social agenda**.

The centrality of this topic in the public agenda is evident in the numerous proposals, plans and studies that are being developed by administrations and policy-makers at local, regional, national and European levels.

In some cases, action has focused on **promoting the settlement of an immigrant population** in these sparsely populated areas, a process that is seen as a double opportunity: rejuvenation and revitalisation of these areas and development and **improvement of the quality of life of the groups that settle there**.

Analysis of these initiatives allows extraction of some elements to be considered in future interventions.

Some figures

- Rural areas make up 85% of the Spanish territory but are home to only 20% of the population.
- A large part of the Spanish rural environment has **population densities of less than 10 inhabitants per km²** and just five inhabitants per km² in the most critical areas, the so-called 'Spanish Lapland'.
- Critical areas are found in provinces such as Soria, Teruel or Cuenca, which have undergone years of population decline and represent 'demographic deserts'. In the province of Soria, 94% of all localities do not exceed 1,000 registered residents.
- Population data show the relevance of 'demographic smallholdings' in which can be found an increasing number of small and progressively diminishing municipalities. The number of municipalities with less than 100 inhabitants now stands at 1,286, up from 928 in 2000. In total 4,000 municipalities (61% of the total) do not have more than 1,000 inhabitants.

Source: Federación Española de Municipios y Provincias (FEMP), 2016.

Combatting depopulation through the promotion of immigration: Cepaim's experience

Among the range of initiatives that are aiming to support the integration of immigrant populations into rural areas, it is worth highlighting the experience of the *Nuevos Senderos* (New Paths) programme of Cepaim.

The [Cepaim](#) Foundation, whose slogan is '*Convivencia y Cohesión social*' (coexistence and social cohesion), promotes a model of intercultural society that facilitates migrants' access to citizens rights by developing policies to fight against any form of social exclusion and by collaborating in the development of their countries of origin. Within its areas of intervention in rural development, the foundation launched in 202 the project *Senderos*, followed by [Nuevos Senderos](#), to integrate immigrant families into unpopulated rural areas.

Through this project, the foundation aims to provide a simultaneous response to the problem of depopulation experienced by different rural territories, as well as to the social and employment difficulties of many immigrants, who are also at risk of social exclusion in urban environments. In view of this challenge, Cepaim promotes the geographical mobility of immigrant individuals and families from urban areas to rural areas in which they can play a role in revitalisation and development.

Cepaim's action is aimed at the immigrant population through **'family unit integration itineraries'**. It works with the family nucleus on the understanding that the social inclusion of the whole family strengthens and consolidates the inclusion of each of its members.

At the same time, the foundation is **recruiting and selecting municipalities** with less than 10,000 inhabitants that have the capacity to offer real employment opportunities in either the public or private sector for one or more members of the family unit.

The itineraries include various **stages of accompaniment**, including the development of practical **training** activities along with more specific occupational training. Immigrants are informed of the possible difficulties involved in living in a small village, including greater social control and greater distrust of new ideas.

In addition, prior visits are made to the destination municipality. After a process of final reflection, the transfer takes place, during which the organisation offers support and accompanies the new arrivals in the necessary procedures.

The programme also includes a **follow-up to the family unit integration process**, including possible mediation in the event of conflict. This monitoring process is more intense in the first weeks following the move, and then it becomes more targeted. In any case, it should enable each family unit to deploy its own strategies for adaptation and conflict resolution, as well as the capacity of the municipality, as an entity representing the whole community, to incorporate new citizens. In order to reach this situation, it will probably be necessary to carry out extensive social awareness activities.²

The **social awareness** of all the agents involved in the itineraries is a specific transversal element of the project. Its objective is to work to eliminate prejudices and negative attitudes towards the foreign population. In this way, a welcoming reception of family units is prepared, while raising society's awareness of the social, economic and cultural wealth that migration brings. A relevant element of Cepaim's methodology is to involve the entire community in the process of social inclusion, and not just family units and municipalities. Specifically, it points out two target groups: the local population in general, and some key individuals such as doctors, teachers, priests, etc.

In order to facilitate the installation process, the formation of sponsoring families is promoted – i.e. indigenous families who wish to participate in the integration process.

In some instances, where tensions or conflicts arise, it is also necessary to use a process of professional intercultural mediation.

Nuevos Senderos in figures

To date³ a total of 571 family units (879 adults with 595 minors) have been advised on their knowledge of the Spanish rural environment.

Intense advisory and development work has taken place with a total of 185 municipalities now following the methodology of intervention with family units of *Nuevos Senderos*.

143 job offers have been managed from the municipalities.

79 family units (156 adults and 184 minors) have been integrated into rural communities.

² Cepaim: *Guía metodológica del proyecto Nuevos Senderos*

https://www.academia.edu/36441459/Gu%C3%ADa_Metodol%C3%B3gica_Nuevos_Senderos_Integraci%C3%B3n_de_Familias_Inmigrantes_en_Zonas_Rurales_Despobladas

³ <http://cepaim.org/que-hacemos-convivencia-social/desarrollo-rural/nuevos-senderos-empleo-rural/>

In short, the *Nuevos Senderos* project is a benchmark for integration of a migrant population into rural areas. It stands out for being an **integral action** that combines working with and raising the awareness of the host municipalities while preparing family units for a long and complex process that seeks to ensure, as far as possible, successful integration.

A successful integration

Melisa and Felipe Martín and their three children of 4 months, 9 and 18 years of age, are a family of Peruvian origin, who settled in a small village of just 488 inhabitants. The village belongs to the Commonwealth of the Izana River in the province of Soria, one of the areas of the country that has been affected most by depopulation.



Photo: Cepaim

The starting point of this successful process is the close cooperation between the municipality of Soria and the Cepaim Foundation, along with the collaborative and supportive attitudes of neighbours and councillors towards the new settlers.

Concerned and committed to the struggle against depopulation, the local mayor contacted Cepaim to find a family that wanted to integrate into the village. In order to make this process possible, and until a suitable job for this family can be found with local enterprises, the mayor offered two positions in the municipal services (in the old people's home and as a multiple service operator). The family would be offered a restored home at a social rent, help and support, and access to the available community services (school, telecentre, social centre, doctor's surgery, bibliobus, municipal swimming pool, etc.).

Following the publication of the offer, Cepaim's rural development technical team looked for a family who would benefit from these job offers. Three families participated in the selection process, and the family of Melisa and Felipe, who then resided in Madrid, was finally selected. They went to the municipality of Soria to get to know the mayor, the village and the homes available, accompanied by the Cepaim technical team. After this visit, both parties took time to reflect, and a few months later decided to proceed with the transfer.

From the very beginning, the family had the support of the municipality's so that they could settle in as quickly as possible. For example, several people from the municipality donated furniture to equip the new family's home.

Felipe is currently working in a wood company, and Melisa is waiting to formalise a work contract. Although both parents have permanent job offers, those have not yet been taken

up. One of the difficulties encountered is due to the fact that the nearest nursery is 15 minutes from the village and only Felipe has a driving licence. The first month also proved to be economically challenging.

Despite these difficulties, it is worth mentioning that the family has adapted to the village, participates in community activities and is very happy to be living in a rural environment. The family was looking for a small, quiet and safe municipality in which to watch their children grow up. They report that the eldest son goes to school alone or with a classmate, something unthinkable both in Peru and in Madrid. The parents consider it essential for their children to grow up in safe surroundings and in contact with the environment.

The Cepaim Foundation is following up on the family's progress and continues to be in contact with the mayor of the municipality in order to manage any day-to-day difficulties that arise.

The keys to success according to Cepaim

- The involvement of mayors in the process of integrating a family into a municipality, sharing information in both directions to understand the impressions and evaluations of each party involved, is considered fundamental.

- The work that is carried out with families in the centres of 'origin', both in preparation for change and in selection, is also essential. Respecting the timetables of each family and supporting the evaluation and analysis of the pros and cons is essential to avoid hasty decisions and to maintain motivation. These actions favour both the family's social and employment integration into rural areas and their capacity to take risks.

- To conclude, it is essential to highlight the need for follow-up and accompaniment of families in this process of change, in order to detect any difficulties they may encounter in their new home and to support them as far as possible in resolving them.

Some conclusions

Although an increase in immigration is considered to be one of the most significant challenge to have occurred in Spain in recent years, the extent of this immigration and its impact **varies considerably from one area to another**.

In the case of inland rural areas, where great demographic change is taking place, the impact of foreign nationals is marked, due to the **capacity of these spaces to retain** these people **in the medium and long term** – one of the elements upon which demographic sustainability and revitalisation depends.

In these rural areas, the influx of foreign populations is primarily driven by specific and highly localised labour requirements or by the existence of **reception programmes or initiatives** linked to the fight against depopulation.

The success of an intervention of these characteristics **requires a long and studied process** in which the **prior selection** of the people who are going to participate in the resettlement, as well as the host territories, takes on particular importance. In this sense, one of the key factors is the **motivation of both participants**:

- ✓ In the case of immigrants, installation into the rural environment through a planned and meditated process which allows advance knowledge of the particularities of the rural society and provides specific motivation for that type of life.
- ✓ In the case of the municipalities, openness and their ability to offer the person who integrates the necessary resources, together with the degree of awareness of the population regarding the need to be welcoming of new settlers and accepting of the differences.

In any case, these aspects can be reinforced through **bidirectional efforts** in which the focus is not only on the integrating immigrants but also on the host population.

The **in-depth knowledge of the municipalities** (resources, possibilities, etc.) on the part of the development agents taking part in these interventions is vital. On the one hand, it will engender the trust of the indigenous population concerning the people who are integrating, while on the other hand, it will effectively balance the needs of the people who wish to settle and those of the municipality, guaranteeing a higher degree of success.

It is also important to stress the need to work hand-in-hand with local authorities and to influence, through training and awareness-raising, the openness and support of various key players (local police, teachers, local development agents, etc.) who can act as mediators in the integration process.

These are long processes in which it is essential that the immigrant knows the environment to be settled in. Likewise, experiences such as Cepaim's, emphasise the need for all the members of the family unit to follow a **training programme** covering a range of issues.

In conclusion, the integration of immigrant population in rural areas must be conceived **as one option in the search for solutions** to deal with the phenomenon of rural depopulation but it is not the only solution. Such interventions must be carried out within a framework of **integral planning** aimed at tackling the different problems (services, employment possibilities, communications etc.) confronting these areas and that are broadly part of the cause of the depopulation process. Others relate to a range of cultural factors that may make the advantages of cities outweigh their disadvantages.

Apart from encouraging the arrival of new settlers, it is also important to create the conditions for the indigenous population to want to stay, and even for encourage some of those who left to return.

The fact that the installation of migrant population is understood as one piece of a broader and more comprehensive strategy **necessarily implies networking and coordination** with multiple agencies and institutions active in the same territory or with the same population.

Original article in Spanish

<https://www.aeidl.eu/images/stories/pdf/immigration-es.pdf>

Articles by Cepaim (ES)

<http://cepaim.org/teruel-destino-de-una-familia-participante-en-el-proyecto-nuevos-senderos/>

<http://cepaim.org/nuestro-proyecto-nuevos-senderos-continua-su-trabajo-en-soria/>

<http://cepaim.org/otra-familia-encuentra-un-nuevo-sendero-en-el-medio-rural-de-soria/>

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She has more than 13 years of experience in rural development, participating in the programming, monitoring and evaluation of numerous Rural Development Programmes financed by the European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development (EAFRD). At the local level, she has taken part in various evaluations associated with LEADER and has supported the drawing up of local development strategies by Local Action Groups.

She collaborates on a range of analyses and tasks and has integrated, as a national expert, the team of the European Commission's European Evaluation Helpdesk for Rural Development.

Throughout her career she has led numerous training courses related to rural development policy, specifically in the field of monitoring and evaluation.

Currently, she directs the department of rural development at Red2red, a consulting firm based in Madrid, for which she coordinates, among other tasks, technical assistance to the Spanish National Rural Network, technical assistance to the Rural Development Programme of the Region of Murcia and the evaluation of the Rural Development Programme of Castile and León.

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