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

Saéz Pérez, L.A.

Universidad de Zaragoza, lasaez@unizar.es

Pinilla, V.

Universidad de Zaragoza, vpinilla@unizar.es

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.

Objectives form a central part of any decision. Therefore, their contemplation is essential. The contrary would be absurd, although common. 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 paradigm. 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.

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.

We attempt to describe how demographic increase has been naturalised as an indisputable objective, inherent in the idea of development, despite its impossibility. Later we explain 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

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.

Keywords:

Depopulation Policies, Rural Development, Shrinking Regions

Thematic Area:

- Local development strategies
- Policy and strategic plan evaluation

Preferred Presentation Format:

☐ Oral presentation