

Article

Rural Depopulation in Spain: A Delphi Analysis on the Need for the Reorientation of Public Policies

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Abstract: In recent years, various plans have been implemented by the central government with the aim of promoting more coordinated policies to address depopulation. The severity of this challenge in Spain, which has continued to intensify, underscores the need for more decisive action. The information presented in this research is derived from a survey conducted in two rounds with 35 experts in the field, following the Delphi methodology. The general objective was to assess the opinions of an expert panel on relevant aspects concerning policies to combat depopulation in Spain. Firstly, confirming the significance of the depopulation challenge; secondly, evaluating whether the actions taken so far have been insufficient and poorly coordinated, necessitating a reconsideration; and finally, establishing a prioritization of actions that should be implemented without further delay, encompassing various areas (financing, taxation, coordination, etc.), are among the many measures advocated by the Spanish Federation of Municipalities and Provinces (FEMP) and proposed in the recent diagnoses by highly authoritative institutions such as the Bank of Spain or the Economic and Social Council of Spain (CES).

Keywords: depopulation; rural areas; development; territorial cohesion; Delphi method; Spain



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1. Introduction

1.1. Depopulation in the National Context

In recent decades, population flows from rural to urban areas have been very intense, particularly since the second half of the last century, linked to the processes of industrialization, urbanization, and development, as observed in structural changes in other European countries [1] (Michaels, et al., 2012) and, in general terms, worldwide [2] (OECD, 2020). In the case of Spain, the depopulation processes in significant rural areas have continued to worsen, with a pronounced population decline since 2011 [3] (Gutierrez, et al., 2020a). This fact is corroborated by Eurostat and, in the case of Spain, by the National Institute of Statistics [4] (INE, 2022). Their population density statistics reveal a growing concentration of the population in large cities, with increasingly depopulated rural areas. The lower population density (93 inhabitants/km²) in Spain compared to other European countries like Germany, Italy, or France is compounded by a higher concentration of its population in urban areas, with some of the highest percentages of uninhabited land, highlighting the gravity of the rural depopulation challenge.

The study of the Spanish case is of particular interest, as it is one of the European Union (EU) countries with the highest urbanization index and a greater concentration of population in inhabited areas. This was emphasized by the Bank of Spain [5] (2021, p. 275), describing how “a large portion of the Spanish territory is uninhabited, with only 12.7% of its surface populated, compared to 67.8%, 59.9%, and 57.2% in countries such as France, Germany, and Italy, respectively”. In the same sense, other studies indicate that there are extensive areas and numerous Spanish municipalities at serious risk of depopulation. For instance [6], Gutierrez, et al. (2020b) described how 42% of the territory has population

densities of less than 12 inhabitants per square kilometer, comparable only to the northern areas of the Scandinavian countries.

The intensity of extreme depopulation in large rural areas of the country was recently analyzed by the [7] BBVA-IVIE Foundation (2019). In this report, it was identified that between 2001 and 2018, 63% of municipalities in Spain experienced population decline. Specifically, municipalities with 1000 or fewer inhabitants (representing 61.5% of the total municipalities and only 3% of the population) suffered this decline most intensely, while the population loss in municipalities with over 20,000 inhabitants was not significant, as also analyzed by [8] Molina de la Torre (2018).

1.2. Theoretical Framework and Previous Research

The challenge of depopulation in Spain has been the focus of extensive analysis over the past two decades, examining the territorial evolution of depopulation in regions and municipalities linked to the ongoing urbanization processes. In Table 1, following a thorough review of prior studies, some of the key aspects identified as the characteristics of these areas are categorized, accompanied by a brief description of their implications and effects. Each of these aspects has repercussions on other elements, establishing inter-connections and ultimately reinforcing the processes of population decline from various dimensions. Most studies on depopulation risk in Spain initiate their analyses with a sociodemographic contextualization. In addition to confirming the low density of these territories (1), coupled with a sustained trend of increasing depopulated areas, they analyze the demographic profile, associating it with the common outflow of the young population or the aging of residents (2), leading to negative natural population growth in these smaller municipalities [8] (Molina de la Torre, 2018), particularly those of smaller size.

Table 1. Characteristics of depopulated areas in Spain and their implications.

Characteristics	Situation Generates	Effects That Reinforce
Low population density	More challenges and insufficient service provision.	The lack of inhabitants affects the provision of public and private services, as well as their economic viability.
Demographic aging and youth migration	Lack of youth and decline in workforce.	Issues with the sustainability of basic services and the viability of activities, leading to negative population growth.
Limited access to basic services	The lack of access to essential services such as education, health, and transportation, whether public or private.	Areas become less attractive for the population, especially for families and the younger population.
Closure of public services	The closure of schools, health centers, and other public services.	An indicator of the decline of a region and can accelerate depopulation by reducing the quality of life.
Limited economic diversification	Dependency on agriculture or traditional industries.	Increased vulnerability, the lack of opportunities, and difficulties in adapting to economic changes.
Lack of job opportunities	The absence of employment, particularly for young and women.	A key factor driving migration to urban or more prosperous areas.
Decline in infrastructure	The lack of investment in infrastructure such as roads, communications, and public services.	Contributes to the decline of a region, increasing the risk of depopulation, leading to territorial competitiveness and the quality of life of its citizens being relegated to a secondary status.
Geographical isolation of remote areas	Remote areas or those with difficult access may experience higher depopulation.	The lack of connectivity and geographical isolation hinders economic and social development.
Lack of attraction for new residents	The lack of capacity or public initiatives to attract new residents.	Depopulation processes persist, accelerating despite the implementation of initiatives that prove ineffective (affordable housing programs, business opportunities, childbirth support, regionalization, and decentralization of services, etc.).

Source: self-generated.

Among the studies addressing the population challenge from a demographic and spatial perspective, notable are the studies of [3–6] Gutiérrez et al. (2020a and b). These studies provide a temporal analysis of the urbanization process and national territory depopulation, considering it within the context of growing social inequalities ([9,10] Camarero et al., 2009, 2020). Authors such as [11] Recaño (2017) underscore that this continuous population loss may be irreversible, propelled by the feedback generated among all the elements being described.

In the realm of analyzing inequalities in access to basic public or private services for rural versus urban populations (3), an increasing number of investigations employ spatial network analysis and geographic information systems. Studies such as those by [12] Alloza et al. (2021) and [6] Gutiérrez et al. (2020b) quantify accessibility deficits between rural and urban populations or the loss of services (4), highlighting the existing inequalities and inequities among citizens in the provision of basic services, describing it as an essential factor in the depopulation processes. An important extension of these analyses of citizens' unequal access to basic services is concerning financial exclusion, lower digitalization, or the closure of banking entities in the depopulated rural areas by [13] Jiménez and Tejero (2018) or [14] Martín-Oliver (2019).

More recent are the analyses of the economic context in areas affected by depopulation, which are scantily diversified and based on traditional activities (5), or especially those with fewer job opportunities (6), considered an essential cause in the outflow of young population, particularly women. A pivotal study in the analysis of the economic challenges of depopulation-prone areas is recently conducted by the [5] Bank of Spain (2021). This study presents a detailed analysis of economic effects and causes of depopulation, providing valuable insights into the other differentiating elements of these municipalities compared to more urban ones, such as income and salary inequalities, the concentration of higher-skilled workers in cities, lower contributions to economic activity, value-added generation, or lower productivity in depopulated rural areas. Furthermore, the study offers an analysis of historical trends in investment concentration promoted in recent decades with the development of Spain and how economic activity and capital have tended to concentrate in urban areas.

The diagnosis from the Bank of Spain and other studies such as [12] Alloza et al. (2021) incorporates an analysis of inequalities in fiscal or public investment terms, identifying deficiencies in improving investments in communications or road networks in these more isolated territories. These studies establish a connection between the higher vulnerability of rural territories at risk of depopulation and their greater distance from major urban centers, as also emphasized by [5] Bank of Spain (2021). Undoubtedly, this vulnerability is associated with particular topographic or geographical isolation characteristics (7). More recently, studies have highlighted deficits in access to digital services and the existence of a digital divide [12] (Alloza et al., 2021). This latest study, like several previously described ones, questions the effectiveness of the implemented public policies (8), as described in this study.

1.3. Government Initiatives for Achieving More Cohesive Territories

In 2017, the Committee of the Regions [15] (European Union, 2017) stated that demographic challenges (in particular aging, a decrease in the number of young people, and low birth rates) are among the most significant challenges facing EU. It identified a higher growth in urban areas than in rural ones in most European countries, with remote rural areas across the continent experiencing intense demographic challenges. Urgent measures were suggested, recognizing that responses to this major challenge are still underdeveloped. In the same year, the Spanish government established the Commissioner for the National Strategy Facing the Demographic Challenge [16] (MPTFP, 2019), approved in the Council of Ministers in March 2019. It is worth noting that two years earlier (2015), a study proposal for the adoption of measures related to rural depopulation in Spain was approved in the Spanish Senate.

A year later, the Ministry for Ecological Transition and the Demographic Challenge initiated a public participation process that led to the approval of the “Recovery Plan: 130 Measures Facing the Demographic Challenge” [17] (MITECO, 2021). This political impulse to face the challenge of depopulation in Spain, proposing coordinated initiatives and special consideration for the depopulation challenge, reflects the growing concern of the national administration in addressing this problem.

These advances, driven by increasing public and media attention during those years, were reinforced by the rigorous studies of several organizations, highlighting the importance of the depopulation challenge and the need to implement measures in multiple areas: [9] Camarero et al. (2009); [10] Camarero et al. (2020); [18] CES, 2018; and [19] CES, (2021). Specifically, there was a consensus among the affected rural municipalities on the specific actions and measures that should be adopted, as outlined in the proposal report by the Spanish Federation of Municipalities [20] (FEMP, 2017).

The following section presents the origin of the information generated in this research through an expert consultation using a two-round Delphi-method survey. Its objective was to gather expert assessments on the relevant aspects of depopulation analysis in Spain, providing their critical and collective insights on policies and initiatives aimed at mitigating or reversing the challenge of depopulation, offering their evaluation of the utility of proposed initiatives in previous diagnoses. In all cases, the statements evaluated by the consulted panel of experts correspond to proposals outlined in recent research. The objective of this investigation is to verify the relevance and importance of their urgent implementation without further delay.

2. Research Methodology

2.1. Delphi Method

This research presents data collected through a survey conducted with experts in the field of rural development and depopulation issues. The Delphi methodology, initially applied in the study of national security by Dalkey and Helmer (1963) [21], has been employed, with numerous applications in various scientific fields for prediction and forecasting over the past 60 years, as extensively reviewed by Khodyakov et al. (2023) [22]. This review builds upon the research of Gupta and Clarke (1996) [23] conducted two decades earlier, and the Delphi method has increasingly found applications in studying the expected effects of agricultural and rural development policies in Spain: [24] Díez (1979); [25] Fearne (1989); [26] Martínez-Carrasco et al. (2014); and [27] Abreu and Mesias (2020).

The Delphi technique aims to obtain the reliable opinions of a group of experts through an interactive process with a small panel of experts. As noted by Landeta (2006) [28] in their literature review that included an analysis of the limitations of this method, it remains a valid instrument for prediction and decision support in the social domain.

In this study, two rounds were conducted, with 35 experts completing the process in two iterations out of the initial 50 participants in the first round. According to Landeta (2002) [29], this methodology allows for expert anonymity, as participants are unaware of each other's identities; and more importantly, it facilitates feedback through successive rounds, enabling group discussion on complex issues.

The research commenced with the design of an initial questionnaire, informed by an extensive literature review and in-depth interviews with 13 experts and stakeholders associated with the rural development in Spain. The questions were asked to the experts to assess their level of agreement with statements presented to them on aspects highlighted by the recent literature, using a Likert scale from 1 to 5 (1 = Totally Disagree; 5 = Totally Agree). They were required to assess areas with varying levels of need for improvement (1 = Very Low Need for Improvement; 5 = Very High Need for Improvement) or prioritize actions presented to them (first, second, or third) based on their importance. All these questions ultimately aimed to contrast the relevance of hypotheses put forward by previous studies, with four main questions intended to be validated by the expert panel:

(1st) How important is the challenge of depopulation in Spain, and to what extent is it complex to reverse or alleviate the processes affecting the large areas of the national territory?

(2nd) Is it necessary to introduce changes in policies to combat depopulation in rural areas, such as reorienting existing policies, making regulatory changes, or allocating more funding for this purpose?

(3rd) Do experts positively evaluate strategies implemented in recent years at the national level, specifically targeting the fight against depopulation in rural areas, and that need to be implemented in the coming years?

(4th) What specific measures and actions in various areas, among those demanded by rural areas affected by depopulation in Spain, should be implemented without further delay, among those proposed and agreed upon within the federation of provinces and municipalities?

Undoubtedly, the statements in the proposed questions are indebted to the findings of previous research, especially those put forth by the Economic and Social Council [7] (CES, 2021) and the [5] Bank of Spain (2021), or more specifically, concrete proposals advocated by the Depopulation Commission created in the Spanish Federation of Municipalities and Provinces [20] (FEMP, 2017).

The final questionnaire was sent via email, which was complemented by the distribution of the questionnaire through *Google Forms*, to a hundred experts on rural areas from various public and private institutions between September and December 2021, eliciting responses from a total of 50 experts (First Round). Following the analysis of responses to this initial survey, the questionnaire underwent revision, providing an opportunity for deferred group discussion.

It is worth noting that the configuration of this initial contact list was complex, involving a significant effort to compile emails through various means. This ranged from the simpler method of identifying researchers with relevant publications for the study to official lists of people responsible for various administrative tasks and institutions (at local, regional, national, and community levels) involved in depopulation issues. Additionally, contacts from rural development actors, primarily those directly involved in various Local Action Groups (LAG), were included in the list.

The second questionnaire (Second Round) was sent between January and March 2022. In addition to incorporating new aspects or nuances raised in the first round, it facilitated controlled feedback. This was made possible by including the aggregated results (from all questions) obtained in the First Round. Each technician could assess, maintain, or alter their responses. Additionally, a new final question was introduced, requiring the evaluation of the importance of various actions in the realm of policies combating depopulation.

2.2. Expert Panel Profile and Study Objectives

The data presented in this research correspond to the responses provided by a panel of 35 experts with whom interaction took place over a period of six months. They responded to the two questionnaires sent (First and Second Rounds), and the results are presented in the following section. As noted by Landeta (2002) [29], the Delphi technique allowed us to obtain the descriptive statistics of the responses, such as the Mean (Me), Median (Md), or relative frequencies (%) of the responses. Despite the small number of experts considered, given the qualitative nature of the instrument, it remains valid for the analysis and understanding of complex social realities, with the presented results having no inferential claims.

As shown in Table 2, the expert panel was heterogeneous, encompassing responses from local development agents, private entities active in the local sphere, researchers (mostly from universities), and members of regional or national public administrations (AAPP), along with responses from experts of European Union (EU) institutions. All of these experts work in the field of rural development and possess a high level of knowledge regarding the depopulation challenge in Spain. The experience and diversity of profiles

among the respondents undoubtedly contributed richness and nuances to the analysis of the complex reality under study, identifying areas where their perspectives differ and others where a high level of consensus exists.

Table 2. Professional profile of the Delphi Panel in the First Round (N = 50) and the Second Round (N = 35).

	Local Development Agents	Private Sector	AAPP	Researchers	European Union Institutions	N°
1st Round	14	10	8	14	4	50
2nd Round	10	4	6	11	4	35

Source: self-generated.

The expert panel had extensive professional experience on the topic of rural areas, with an average of 20 years in this field; all had university education, with 62.9% having completed postgraduate studies. Their level of knowledge about the depopulation challenge was high, with a self-assessed knowledge level of 4 (on a scale of 1 to 5) being the mode for the topics addressed in this study.

It is important to mention that responses were obtained from experts who work in different Spanish Autonomous Communities (Andalusia, Aragon, Castilla-La Mancha, Madrid, Region of Murcia, and Valencia), as indicated, in institutions operating at the local, regional, national, or European levels. This diversity enriched the assessment of the questions posed to them regarding the debate and situation in Spain concerning the challenge of rural areas experiencing significant depopulation.

The obtained information, valuable for its specialized and exploratory nature, provides insights into the perspectives that professionals from different sectors (Table 2) hold regarding the key aspects in the design and implementation of public policies to support rural areas undergoing depopulation processes. It is noteworthy that, although the study focuses on policies to combat rural depopulation in Spain, it offers valuable reflections that could be considered in guiding future rural development and territorial cohesion policies implemented in other EU countries. These insights may prove useful in shaping or reorienting national-level territorial policies.

3. Results

3.1. Importance of the Depopulation Challenge in Spain

As shown in Table 3, all 35 experts in the panel perceive the depopulation challenge in Spain as either “serious” or “very serious”. This issue, affecting extensive rural areas due to the continuous processes of urbanization and population loss in vast rural regions, was specifically rated as “very serious” by 62.9% (22 out of 35) participants in the Second Round.

Table 3. Assessment of considerations regarding the depopulation challenge in Spain (N = 35).

Rating from 1 to 5 (Ratings from 1 = Completely Disagree to 5 = Completely Agree)	Relative Frequency (%)					Me	Md
	1	2	3	4	5		
1. The depopulation challenge is a very serious issue in Spain	0.0	0.0	0.0	37.1	62.9	4.6	5
2. Combating depopulation in rural areas should be one of the major national challenges	0.0	0.0	5.7	28.6	65.7	4.6	5
3. Depopulation in rural areas and small municipalities is a complex and challenging issue to reverse.	0.0	8.6	5.7	48.6	37.1	4.1	4
4. Citizens are aware of the depopulation problem and its connection to the multifunctionality of rural areas.	17.1	45.7	22.9	14.3	0.0	2.3	2

Source: Results from the Second Round of the Delphi Panel.

The level of consensus regarding the consideration of depopulation as one of the “major national challenges” was also very high. A total of 94.3% agreed or strongly agreed

with the statement, with an average rating of 4.6. This aligns with the importance attributed to this issue in terms of territorial and social cohesion by the [5] Bank of Spain (2021) and [8] Molina de la Torre (2018).

Slightly lower percentage (85.7%) of experts indicated agreement or strong agreement with the fact that depopulation is a complex problem to solve or reverse, echoing various diagnostics and emphasizing the importance of addressing it from multiple perspectives [18] (CES, 2018). The magnitude and difficulty of the depopulation challenge should make us aware of the need to formulate creative and holistic rural development policies and initiatives that could shape rural territories as spaces for experimentation and new opportunities [30] (Pinilla and Sáez, 2017), tailored to the needs or challenges of each territory.

Contrastingly, 22 out of 35 respondents disagreed or strongly disagreed with the statement that the Spanish population, in general, has a high level of awareness about the importance of the depopulation problem and the multiple functions that “vibrant” rural areas have for society as a whole. The average value (Me) for this statement was 2.3, with a median (Md) of 2. This result contrasts with the findings of the [31] CIS Barometer (2019) five years ago. According to this study, the Spanish population was becoming increasingly aware about depopulation, with 82.4% stating they had heard about the depopulation challenge, of which 90% considered it to be a “very or quite serious” problem, reflecting a growing public concern.

In another question included in the First Round, which saw minimal changes in the responses provided in the Second Round (indicating the stability of responses achieved in the second survey), the panel of experts was asked to indicate, in their opinion, the importance (on a scale of 1 to 5, with 5 = very important) of different areas for improvement in rural areas that determine the need for greater support to these regions.

As shown in Table 4, more than three-quarters of the panel of expert considered it “important” or “very important” to improve the situation of the population of rural municipalities affected by depopulation in comparison with the situation of the urban population. These areas include the following: (1) improving access to jobs and employment opportunities; (2) the equalization of high-quality public health services for the elderly or children with those available in urban areas; (3) enhancing infrastructure and transportation connections, such as improving road networks or public transportation with larger neighboring municipalities; and (4) the need to improve digital infrastructure and internet access, as frequently mentioned in the literature. Following these four needs of the rural population, there is also a high consensus regarding the compelling need of improving access to other local private services (such as pharmacies, post offices, and shops), as well as improving access to basic education services. In general, these results suggest the need for improvement in terms of quality and coverage for the entire population of fundamental basic services [15] (European Union, 2017), mitigating the processes of the so-called “rural exodus” in Spain [6] (Gutierrez, et al., 2020b).

These described deficiencies, in addition to reinforcing the consideration that the challenge of depopulation in rural areas must be understood as a problem lacking socio-territorial cohesion, suggest that we should not only analyze the problem as a demographic issue but also as an economic and social one. Therefore, it is necessary to counteract the gradual loss of territorial competitiveness that has occurred in Spanish rural areas, with the aim of generating employment and economic activity to increase the attraction of an active population, opportunities, and spaces for medium-term development. This involves actions aimed at maintaining a minimum level of services that ensure the well-being of inhabitants of rural areas.

Table 4. Evaluation of the improvement needs of the population in depopulating rural areas compared to the situation in urban areas (N = 35).

Rating from 1 to 5 (1 = Very Low Need for Improvement and 5 = Very High Need for Improvement)	Relative Frequency (%)					Me	Md
	1	2	3	4	5		
1st. Availability of job/employment/business opportunities.	0.0	0.0	8.6	22.9	68.6	4.6	5
2nd. Access to healthcare or childcare for children and the elderly.	0.0	0.0	8.6	40.0	51.4	4.4	5
3rd. Infrastructure and transportation connections (e.g., with urban areas and other towns).	2.9	2.9	31.4	11.4	51.4	4.1	5
4th. Digital infrastructure (broadband and internet access).	0.0	5.7	17.1	37.1	40.0	4.1	5
5th. Access to local services, such as shops, post offices, pharmacies, etc.	0.0	0.0	22.9	42.9	34.3	4.1	4
6th. Access to education and training services.	0.0	0.0	14.3	60.0	25.7	4.1	4
7th. Access to cultural and recreational activities.	0.0	5.7	37.1	31.4	25.7	3.8	4
8th. Threats to the natural environment and its protection.	2.9	11.4	34.3	28.6	22.9	3.6	4
9th. Availability of housing.	0.0	25.7	37.1	14.3	22.9	3.3	3
10th. Access and affordability of various energy options (gas, electricity, etc.).	2.9	14.3	37.1	37.1	8.6	3.3	3

Source: results from the Second Round of the Delphi Panel.

Other aspects, described in the last four rows of Table 4, obtained mean scores closer to a mean value of three, showing a higher level of disagreement among respondents regarding their severity. This was the case for equalizing the opportunities for the population of small rural municipalities affected by depopulation in terms of their access to cultural and leisure activities; the protection and maintenance of the values of their natural and environmental surroundings; or the availability of access to housing or different energy options. These responses result from both a neutral assessment by a significant number of experts and the presence of different considerations regarding their relevance. In these cases, the results could be justified by the fact that, while in some rural areas in Spain these needs are adequately addressed, in others they remain significant obstacles to their development, which motivates the migration of their population to more urban municipalities.

3.2. Need to Promote Development Policies Targeted at Depopulated Areas

In a second major block of the present study, the aim was to identify the changes that, in the opinion of the experts, should be introduced in public policies implemented in Spain to combat depopulation, both at national and regional levels. Thus, as shown in Table 5, there was virtually unanimous agreement (97.1%) in the belief that it is necessary to consider, in public policies (Mean = 4.6 and Median = 5), in various areas of economic and social development, a greater focus on territorial cohesion, introducing positive discrimination criteria for rural areas at risk of depopulation. This is in line with the procedures applied in cohesion and investment policies of the European Union, taking into account the level of development of the member countries. This result coincides with the statements of several authors, among them [32] is Bello Parades (2023), who indicated “the need to rethink public policies to lead to greater territorial cohesion and, ultimately, to offer solutions to these territories”.

There was also very high consensus on the need for regulatory changes, particularly a higher level of coordination between public administrations (with shared or exclusive competencies in different areas) in public policies aimed at supporting rural areas. In this sense, a total of 91.4% of the Delphi panel agreed or strongly agreed with the need for more efforts in horizontal and vertical coordination between administrations, as well as the reformulation of regulatory frameworks in various areas, described in great detail by [19] CES (2021).

Table 5. Evaluation of the need for changes in policies to combat depopulation in rural areas (N = 35).

Ratings from 1 to 5 (1 = Completely Disagree to 5 = Completely Agree)	Relative Frequency (%)					Me	Md
	1	2	3	4	5		
It is necessary to introduce the territorial cohesion approach in national and regional policies, paying particular attention to the challenges of depopulated rural areas.	0.0	0.0	2.9	34.3	62.9	4.6	5
There is a need for further normative development and coordination among public administrations in the fight against depopulation.	0.0	0.0	8.6	34.3	57.1	4.5	5
It is necessary to allocate a larger portion of national and regional policy funding to areas affected by depopulation, even at the expense of other policies.	2.9	0.0	28.6	34.3	34.3	4.0	4

Source: results from the Second Round of the Delphi Panel.

Finally, there was also a high consensus in the belief that more financial resources should be allocated to support national and regional policies for depopulated rural areas (Mean = 4 and Median = 4), even if this came at the expense of resources allocated to other purposes or public policies. The lack of financial support for plans or programs was pointed out by [18] CES (2018) as one of the reasons that had largely prevented the development of agreements and commitments for initiatives co-financed by the national administration and the Spanish autonomous communities under the Sustainable Rural Development Program, as well as Law 45/2007 on Sustainable Rural Development, which was never implemented. In this context of increased funding and coordination of funds, the experience of the Agenzia per la Coesione Territoriale Italiana [33] (ENRD, 2020) is of interest, as an example of designing a comprehensive rural development strategy, coordinating projects financed with European structural and investment funds.

In another question, the Delphi panel was asked to assess actions and policies recently undertaken that, in several areas, could be an essential support for a more sustainable development of the territory, particularly addressing the needs of rural areas at risk of depopulation. One such example is the Cross-Cutting Objective proposed by the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) for the current budgetary period, 2021–2027, regarding the support for the digitization of the agri-food sector and rural areas, aiming to bridge the digital divide in rural areas. In this statement, there was unanimous consensus among the respondents (Table 6), with 100% agreeing or strongly agreeing with the importance of digitization support included in the national plans of the CAP in its first pillar (Mean = 4.6). This result aligns with the essential role that the provision of digital and financial services, along with the development of training programs in digital skills for businesses and the population in rural areas in Spain, plays in revitalizing rural areas [12] (Allonza, et al., 2021).

Table 6. Evaluation of strategies implemented at the national level in the fight against depopulation in Spanish rural areas (N = 35).

Ratings from 1 to 5 (1 = Completely Disagree to 5 = Completely Agree)	Relative Frequency (%)					Me	Md
	1	2	3	4	5		
Strategies aimed at digitization should pay special attention to supporting rural areas and the agri-food sector, bridging gaps with urban areas and other sectors.	0.0	0.0	0.0	40.0	60.0	4.6	5
The Next-Generation Recovery Funds should prioritize financing investments in rural areas and municipalities affected by depopulation.	0.0	2.9	8.6	42.9	45.7	4.3	5
Environmental strategies aimed at combating climate change, decarbonization, renewable energies, etc., should give special attention to supporting rural areas.	0.0	0.0	17.1	51.4	31.4	4.1	4
The “Plan of Measures for the Demographic Challenge” is an excellent starting point for the formulation of coordinated policies against depopulation.	0.0	0.0	28.6	48.6	22.9	3.9	4

Source: results from the Second Round of the Delphi Panel.

The relevance given to the Next Generation EU funds (NGEU) is also very important, with a substantial majority of the panel (88.7%) agreeing that it is essential for NGEU priorities to include financing investments in areas affected by depopulation. Similarly, a significant portion of the panel of experts (82.8%) considered that substantial funds directed toward environmental measures aimed at combating climate change in rural areas in the coming years are a new opportunity for the revitalization and development of depopulated areas in Spain, according to [19] CES (2021).

Finally, a significant majority of the experts considers that the “Plan of Measures for the Demographic Challenge” [17] (MITECO, 2021), described in the introduction of this study, is an excellent starting point for the formulation of coordinated policies against depopulation, with no expert expressing disagreement, corresponding to scores of 1 or 2.

3.3. Expectations Regarding the New CAP Post-2023

It is essential at this point to mention that, at the time of conducting this Delphi survey, the negotiation process for the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) Post-2020 was still ongoing, a sectoral policy of significant importance for the entire rural environment. The intricate negotiation process led to an extension of the deadline for submitting the Strategic Plans for the Common Agricultural Policy (PEPAC) of the member states, including Spain, to 31 December 2021 [34] (MAPA, 2021). This necessitated a postponement of the implementation of the new CAP to 1 January 2023. It is relevant to provide a brief description of aspects available at the time of this research and on which several statements were presented to the experts.

As shown in Table 7, 60.0% of the experts indicated their agreement or strong agreement that the diagnosis presented by this national strategy regarding the needs of the agricultural sector is appropriate (Mean = 3.6; Median = 4). It is noteworthy that the percentage of responses giving equal consideration (42.9%) to the diagnosis of the needs of the rural environment is slightly lower (Mean = 3.5; Median = 3).

Table 7. Assessment of the Common Agricultural Policy Post-2020 and its National Strategic Plan (N = 35).

Ratings from 1 to 5 (1 = Completely Disagree to 5 = Completely Agree)	Relative Frequency (%)					Me	Md
	1	2	3	4	5		
1. The Spanish Strategic Plan for the Post-CAP accurately diagnoses the needs of the agricultural sector.	2.9	5.7	31.4	45.7	14.3	3.6	4
2. The Spanish Strategic Plan for the Post-CAP accurately diagnoses the needs of the rural environment.	2.9	2.9	51.4	31.4	11.4	3.5	3
3. In its design and implementation, as in other policies, the participation of key stakeholders is insufficient.	8.6	14.3	8.6	40.0	25.7	3.6	4
4. The growth of resources allocated to the environment and climate action, in line with the European Green Deal, is positive for society as a whole.	0.0	0.0	2.9	45.7	51.4	4.5	5
5. The increase in resources allocated to the environment and climate action, in line with the European Green Deal, is positive for the agricultural sector.	0.0	2.9	2.9	54.3	40.0	4.3	4
6. The funds for Rural Development managed by Local Action Groups should be greater.	0.0	8.6	25.7	28.6	37.1	3.9	4
7. The increase in bureaucracy and administrative burden associated with monitoring CAP aid is excessive.	2.9	5.7	17.1	31.4	42.9	4.1	4
8. The increase in bureaucracy for Local Action Groups hampers their ability to revitalize territories.	0.0	2.9	11.4	51.4	34.3	4.2	4

Source: results from the Second Round of the Delphi Panel.

Regarding the ongoing participation process in the design and implementation of this national strategy, a high percentage of experts (60.0%) also indicated their agreement or

strong agreement that the involvement of key stakeholders was insufficient, as is the case in the design of other policies.

Given that one of the main changes in the new Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) is related to the reinforcement of measures against climate change and environmental protection, two final statements were proposed on this matter. In line with the “European Green Deal”, particularly the “Farm to Fork” strategy, the new CAP will allocate 40% of its funds to this purpose. The proportion of panel members expressing agreement or full agreement with the positive effects of this environmental orientation on society as a whole was maximum (97.1%), with a median response of five. Its positive consideration was slightly lower in the agricultural sector (84%). It is worth noting that in the previous CAP, eco-conditionality measures had already gained significant prominence, with eco-schemes and other environmental requirements becoming an unstoppable trend. Despite the undeniable fact that these measures will impose new demands on the agricultural sector, the responses obtained, considering comments from interviews, suggest that a significant part of the primary sector seems to have embraced the increasing connection that public support will have, beyond its goals of income maintenance or ensuring food security, to agriculture that provides environmental services to society as a whole.

The last two statements referred to the significant role that Local Action Groups (LAGs) play in Rural Development, within the second pillar of the CAP. The level of consensus is high, with a median of four, regarding the need for LAGs, heirs to the Leader initiative, to have a greater volume of resources, and how the administrative burden associated with the management of CAP aid and bureaucratic obstacles hinders the operational capacity of these revitalizers of rural areas.

In line with the aspects described regarding the CAP and its relevance in rural development, the European Economic and Social Committee emphasized in several opinions the importance of achieving better governance and participation in the design and implementation of policies impacting the development of rural areas. Historically fragmented, disjointed, and burdened with bureaucracy [35] (Unión Europea, 2022), there is a need to continue promoting greater alignment of the CAP with other cohesion policies (Cohesion Funds, the European Regional Development Fund, or the European Social Fund). These objectives are among those proposed to advance in the coming years within the EU Rural Action Plan, with the Commission planning to publish impact reports on policies and improvement needs throughout 2024.

3.4. Prioritization of Coordinated Measures to Support Depopulated Rural Areas

Finally, Table 8 presents the assessment provided by the panel of 35 experts to 15 selected measures, many of which were advocated by [20] FEMP (2017) and grouped into seven major areas: institutional measures and financing; economy and employment; infrastructure; social services; housing; demographic incentives; and culture, identity, and communication.

The questionnaire asked them to identify the three most important measures that should be implemented with greater urgency, and these were ordered based on the most frequently mentioned as top priorities (Table 8). The generated ranking identifies 6 actions out of the 15 concrete measures in which at least a quarter of the panel of experts considered them to be among the top three priorities. The first one stands out, with 62.7% of the Delphi panel considering it urgent, and is to establish (first) plans for basic public services in the health, education, or social protection sectors, equalizing the level of access and coverage between rural and urban populations.

Table 8. Ranking of specific measures to be urgently implemented in Spain (Top 15) in the fight against depopulation of rural areas (N = 35).

Measures and Actions to Support Rural Areas Affected by Depopulation (1st = First or Most Important; 2nd = Second; 3rd = Third)	Relative Frequency (%)			
	1st	2nd	3rd	Total
1. Establish plans for the coverage of guaranteed basic public services in rural areas, including healthcare, education, and social services, comparable to those in urban areas.	20.0	31.4	11.4	62.9
2. Implement incentives and support for the location and creation of businesses and employment in rural areas.	17.1	14.3	5.7	37.1
3. Review the funding of local entities with criteria ensuring their subsistence and covering extra costs associated with providing basic services in small communities, reinforcing criteria for accessing lines and plans for smaller municipalities.	14.3	8.6	14.3	37.1
4. Establish special support plans for self-employed individuals and entrepreneurs in rural areas, promoting training and employment, with special attention to young people and women.	8.6	8.6	14.3	31.4
5. Explicitly include in the budgets of all Public Administrations (AAPP), a demographic strategy with annual objectives, means to achieve them, and an evaluation of achievements.	17.1	2.9	5.7	25.7
6. Provide tax credits and deductions for professional and business activities carried out in rural areas or in personal income tax for residents.	5.7	11.4	8.6	25.7
7. Provide support for childbirth, bonuses for families with children, or encourage the proximity of daycare services.	2.9	2.9	5.7	11.4
8. Promote urban regeneration, rehabilitation plans, and access to housing for the population of small municipalities, creating housing opportunities, etc.	0.0	8.6	2.9	11.4
9. Facilitate the decentralization of public care resources in the Autonomous Community (residences, youth centers, day centers, home assistance, etc.), supporting the creation of intermunicipal associations.	0.0	5.7	5.7	11.4
10. Improve communication infrastructure based on a distance map to basic services and enhance public transportation services for the population of rural municipalities.	0.0	0.0	11.4	11.4
11. Reinstate the 2007 Sustainable Rural Development Law, envisioned as a national framework with common and harmonized guidelines in the fight against depopulation in Spain, obliging the development of area plans as an intervention scale.	5.7	0.0	2.9	8.6
12. Promote and support intermunicipal associations for social and public services.	5.7	0.0	2.9	8.6
13. When implementing depopulation countermeasures at the national, regional, or autonomous community levels, clearly define the competence, whether unique or shared.	2.9	2.9	2.9	8.6
14. Improve digital infrastructure and implement ICT training plans in rural areas.	0.0	2.9	2.9	5.7
15. Develop communication strategies to promote the advantages of rural areas, fostering identity.	0.0	0.0	2.9	2.9

Source: results from the Second Round of the Delphi Panel.

This reinforces the line of work proposed by various studies that verify and quantify how rural areas in Spain have poorer accessibility to services than their European counterparts ([36] Kompil, et al., 2019), revealing significant deficits in the accessibility to basic services in rural municipalities compared to urban ones ([12] Allonza, et al., 2021; [37] Goerlich et al., 2021). As previous reports, such as the one conducted by the [7] BBVA Foundation (2019), suggest, making these areas economically and socially “attractive” is key to their repopulation. It should be added that, as this is not an exclusive challenge for Spain but is also identifiable in Eastern and Baltic EU countries, as well as other countries like Greece, Portugal, or regions in southern Italy, it presents an opportunity for the adoption of these measures as an essential part of community policies.

In the field of employment and economic opportunities, two priority actions were mentioned: establishing incentives for location and business creation (second), as well as supporting the installation of self-employed individuals and entrepreneurs in rural areas (fourth), with special attention to young people and women, developing tax deductions and incentives for this purpose (sixth). Regarding institutional measures, the panel of experts

considered it a priority to increase the budgets of local administrations in rural areas and their possibilities of accessing other lines of funding (third), with the explicit inclusion in the budgets of all administrations (fifth) of actions aimed at fighting depopulation.

In this area of promoting economic activity through fiscal policies, the proposal for differentiated taxation for depopulated rural areas, described under the concept of “demographic ultra-periphery”, is relevant, as outlined by [38] Herce et al. (2019); these authors propose the possibility of a “differentiated tax system for repopulation”, with deductions and bonuses at the national and regional levels in the Personal Income Tax (IRPF), Wealth Tax (IP), Transfer Tax and Documented Legal Acts (ITP and AJD), Inheritance and Gift Tax (IS and D), or Corporate Taxes (IS).

Table 8 presents ten other actions, to a lesser extent than those identified as more urgent, but all of them would undoubtedly be essential for the fight against depopulation. Among the most valued are the further development of support for childbirth and the permanence of families in rural areas (seventh); plans for the regeneration of housing and urban centers (eighth); promoting the creation of inter-municipal public service associations (ninth); or improving road communication infrastructures and public transportation (tenth), with six additional actions described.

It is worth recalling that many of the proposed measures and tax incentives have been employed in other countries such as Ireland, France, England, or Sweden [16] (MPTFP, 2019). Notably, studies like the one conducted by the [5] Bank of Spain (2021) and the [39] SSPA (2017) highlight the case and efforts of the Highlands and Islands Enterprise (HIE) in Ireland, which has successfully reversed the population decline in the Highlands and Islands of Scotland. Undoubtedly, in the European context, numerous experiences in rural development have, in a more localized manner, significantly contributed to retaining people in the territory in many European countries. It is interesting to read the review by [40] Latocha-Wites et al. (2024), examining the exogenous and endogenous factors that justify their success. The study concludes the relevance of the latter, particularly the presence of territorial and social capital.

In many instances, demographic recovery processes in depopulated areas have been accompanied by the return of urban populations to rural areas due to shifts in social preferences, such as residential choices or the pursuit of an enhanced quality of life. Additionally, advancements of transportation and communication networks have significantly contributed to making former remote locations appealing to citizens. These processes enable the identification of social trends favoring rural repopulation or counter-urbanization, phenomena that have been occurring for decades in many developed countries [41] (Woods, 2011). Spain has not been immune to these social processes, with a particularly intense flow of population directed towards dynamic rural areas, especially those in proximity to large cities or population centers [42] (Molinero, 2017). Noteworthy are specific cases, albeit more isolated, where there has been migration to more remote and isolated areas by new urban settlers, often highly qualified individuals. These individuals integrate into the established labor markets or establish innovative businesses in the territory with a global orientation [43] (Baylina et al., 2019).

4. Discussion

The described Delphi analysis, starting from a questionnaire that collected proposals outlined in previous studies on the issue of depopulation in Spain, has allowed contrasting the existence of significant consensus on various aspects, facilitated by the deferred discussion provided by the two rounds of submissions. Among the main findings of this research, outlined in the previous section, it is noteworthy to highlight the significant consensus on important issues already addressed by other investigations.

Firstly, regarding the severity of the depopulation problem, all 35 experts consider depopulation to be a “serious” or “very serious” issue in Spain, emphasizing the greater vulnerability of rural areas at risk of depopulation ([44] Reig, et al., 2016). This result aligns with previous studies, emphasizing the need to address this problem adequately, providing

evidence on this territorial and social issue. Noteworthy are studies conducted by reputable bodies such as [19] CES (2021) and [5] Bank of Spain (2021), which express the need for it to be considered and addressed as a “state matter” ([45] Paniagua, 2019; [46] Moyano, 2020).

Secondly, regarding the evidence of the need for improvement in opportunities and services accessed by the population in many rural areas, ensuring that they are comparable to those enjoyed by urban citizens. Key areas requiring urgent improvements in rural areas are identified, as described by [12] Allonza et al. (2021) or [37] Goerlich et al. (2021), emphasizing the necessary equality in access to employment opportunities, healthcare, infrastructure, digital services, and education. Therefore, greater effort is needed to ensure a basic set of services for citizens and, as noted by [5] Banco de España (2021), to generate the necessary conditions for their medium- and long-term development, enhancing the competitiveness of their territories.

Thirdly, the need for public policies to establish explicit objectives and actions aimed at making progress in the depopulation challenge (at the normative, budgetary, financial levels, etc.) and greater coordination. The expert panel reaches a high level of consensus advocating for public policies addressing depopulation with a territorial cohesion approach proposed by [8] Molina de la Torre (2018), involving regulatory changes, greater coordination between administrations, and the allocation of specific financial resources for this purpose. All these aspects, as described in the [5] Bank of Spain (2021) report, will be necessary but not sufficient conditions to mitigate or reduce the depopulation problem in Spain.

Fourthly, the need for taking urgent action. Among the measures considered by the expert panel are establishing plans for basic public services, incentives for business location, reviewing the financing of local entities, and supporting self-employed individuals and entrepreneurs. In this regard, it is necessary to give due attention to the specific actions proposed years ago by the Spanish Federation of Municipalities [20] (FEMP, 2017), as well as other voices advocating for development policies to introduce elements of positive discrimination in favor of areas affected by depopulation, of a budgetary, fiscal, administrative, or other nature.

Fifthly, implementing the “Plan of Measures for the Demographic Challenge” is of relevance. This plan [11] (MITECO, 2021) is perceived by the consulted experts as an excellent starting point for addressing depopulation, as it designs mechanisms for coordinating policies, vertically and horizontally, demonstrating the existence of a will for a more comprehensive and coordinated action of existing resources and policies.

Lastly, the substantial funds directed from the European Union towards digitalization, among others, the Next Generation funds, represent an opportunity that can be decisive in revitalizing rural areas, with significant digital divides. Such efforts need to be made in the current budgetary period, integrating the dimension of depopulation into other European programs with a significant impact on rural areas, undoubtedly including the Common Agricultural Policy’s (CAP) Strategic Plan within the current Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF) for the seven-year period 2021–2027 [34] (MAPA, 2021). The importance and impact of agricultural funds EAGGF (European Agricultural Guidance and Guarantee Fund) and rural development (European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development (EAFRD)) on the development of rural areas are significant. Additionally, other funds such as the European Regional Development Fund (ERDF) or the European Social Fund (ESF) should address depopulation as a criterion for project selection. Similarly, the experts on the panel see that the EU’s Next Generation funds could be essential for financing significant investments in areas affected by depopulation in the coming years, supporting innovation and modernization processes. This presents an unmissable opportunity to boost competitiveness or the number of future innovative projects [47] (Fernández de Cayuela and Santos Álvarez, 2022).

In conclusion, it is important to highlight the complexity of the challenge and how it is essential to emphasize that, while all outlined actions are relevant and should be integrated and considered, they need to be tailored to each territory [11] (Recaño, 2021),

given their particularities and needs [48] (Bandrés and Azón, 2023), based on a previous appropriate diagnosis [49] (Colino et al., 2022), with a willingness for experimentation and analysis of the best practices in other countries or regions ([39] SSPA, 2017; [50] SSPA, 2021). As pointed out by [51] Velasco Caballero (2022), the goal should be to generate a more integrated and balanced (cohesive) territorial model, seizing opportunities such as digitalization, ecological transition, or lifestyle changes. Undoubtedly, resources from restructuring funds or other European policies [52] (Moyano Estrada and Gómez Benito, 2022) could contribute to ensuring that residents in depopulated areas enjoy better services and infrastructure than currently exist in Spain, but above all, promote more innovative actions of endogenous development.

5. Conclusions

The Delphi analysis conducted has confirmed the severity of the depopulation problem in extensive rural areas of Spain, which, according to the consulted experts, should be considered one of the main national challenges. The level of consensus achieved in various statements allows the identification of areas where it is urgent to proceed with the development and implementation of new and more effective public policies, acknowledging their complexity. One of the most significant aspects is to increase coordination among different administrations for actions carried out jointly or within their respective areas of competence, redirecting them towards strategies for more sustainable territorial and social development. These strategies should explicitly define the goal of reversing population flows from rural to urban areas. This achievement requires coordinated and comprehensive action, undoubtedly involving the combination of efforts from multiple areas. The improvements in basic public services accessed by the population of rural municipalities, addressing deficits in terms of accessibility and quality, are described as the more urgent measures. Simultaneously, equal emphasis should be placed on the specific actions that enhance employment opportunities in rural areas. This undoubtedly involves positive differentiation in favor of productive projects in rural areas, as well as the improvement in transportation and communication infrastructure to restore the competitiveness levels of rural areas against urban ones, generating new development opportunities in the medium term.

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