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**AN INTRODUCTION TO «THE ETERNAL RURAL DIVIDE:  
 INEQUALITIES, EXCLUSIONS AND CITIZEN INACCESSIBILITY.  
 NOTES FOR CHRONIC CRISES»**

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**The eternal rural gap: a matter of citizenship**

Rural development used to be the epithet of rurality; now depopulation has taken its place. We have chopped and changed between one elusive lens and another to confront the challenge of inequality, to avoid tackling the perennial rural gap.

The rural gap is the set of urban–rural differences that reflect the persistent inability of rural areas to achieve the same standards of living, services and life opportunities, and that can be expressed through the cumulative effect of various processes of concentration –demographic and economic– and also of differences in terms of accessibility (Camarero and Oliva 2019).

Act One: development caused blame. Literally, the term used was backwardness; rural communities were deemed responsible for stagnation; they were censured for not taking part in the project of modernity; they were blatantly accused of underdevelopment. But in fact, the sequence of explanations had been changed and reality had been turned upside down. In truth, the development model grounded in the rationale of the agglomeration economy, based on the continuous concentration of capital, resources, employment and talent, caused huge socio-demographic vacuums that would constitute the graveyards left by demographic extraction. Yet those who remained in the rural areas and ensured that the urban industrial enclaves could function by maintaining the sources of energy, environment and agriculture they needed, had their enforced position on the periphery thrown back in their faces.

The great recession at the start of the twentieth century meant that no corner was unaffected by the vicissitudes of what is euphemistically known as financial capitalism. We came to understand that we were part of an interconnected world. But not only that. The bubble that burst in the metropolitan skyscrapers affected futures markets, expectations, and in sum, also reshaped the generational sequences on which the Welfare State was constructed; generations whose access to economic autonomy is already affected by their reduced life expectancy at birth, a symptom of their feeble inclusion in the welfare system, and who as a result, now make up this growing army of the (new) precariat.

So, rural development gives way to depopulation as an expression of concern. The so-called ‘demographic winter’ focuses on demographic capacity. Depopulation sets the trend, but once again it turns the causal sequence upside down. Act Two: The Song of Empty Spain, the sentiment of a generation that was born rural and, without knowing how, lived urban, with the impression that they did not write the script for their own life story, has spawned the debate on Terminal Spain, in which again they are blamed for their plight. We have heard villages crudely described as entities doomed to extinction, terms that stoke the ascendant analysis that promotes a raft of miscellaneous proposals for the institutional closure of municipalities. We have seen the rise of the disturbing argument that service provision is more expensive in rural areas and services are more complicated to operate. At the same time,



private service operators contracted to run public services are quietly withdrawing from rural areas. Somewhere in the decision-making process, a kind of rural eugenics is taking place, justified on the grounds of administrative rationalisation.

As in *Groundhog Day*, we are again witnessing the same problems that ushered in the rural development policies of the 80s; policies that secured a rural reconversion on the terms dictated by urban utilitarianism. At that time, agriculture was preparing the way for a new landscape of global production chains, and family farms that distorted the markets and annoyed the taxpayer had to be cast aside. The Common Agricultural Policy was the first instrument for European cohesion and, let us not forget, the biggest recipient of financial resources; it eventually achieved the industrialisation of agriculture and gradually disengaged agricultural activity from where it had always taken place.

The LEADER projects and other revitalisation mechanisms took over the reconversion of production and began to diversify the range of activities and strengthen others that were increasingly tailored and adapted to the urban consumer. Rural tourism was upheld as the great paradigm. Development was woven through a complex game that promoted the very identities that feed the post-production economy and resignify the rural world. And indeed, these policies have generally been successful and have led to a rural–urban connection based on the market.

But let's not forget that the rationale of economic development is extremely simple: generate economic well-being and, under the principle of *ceteris paribus*, we can assume that economic wellbeing will be smoothly transformed into welfare. Yet just because it is simple does not mean it is true. Social welfare is not built only on economic foundations; it is a collective project and an exercise in solidarity.

The long post-crisis after the 2008 recession clearly demonstrated the inadequacy of the development model and the dependence of rural areas in terms of resources and social protection. The winds of austerity provided the perfect excuse to tighten the belt on our collective welfare project, while stealthily feeding the triumphant neoliberal programme. Social vulnerability intensified and the cracks in rural territorial cohesion grew wider (Döner, Figueiredo and Rivera, 2020). The toll of this reduced accessibility opened the way for the *España Vacuada* (Emptied Spain) demonstrations, consolidated around the demand for full citizens rights, regardless of chosen place of residence. These protests expressed the profound discontent of those who feel their opportunities are constantly undermined and who face extreme problems of access to the services and instruments of the Welfare State; and welfare, let us not forget, is a collective good.

This model prioritises recipes for rural development through a weak lens on public policies for rural territories, and calls for urgent review. And this review, and subsequent reorientation of objectives, must be carried out by civil society. Through this collection of research articles from various fields, we hope to draw attention to these issues, and provide a taste of different development processes. Our aim is not to assess their achievements, although they are significant, nor to measure the quality of their performance according to balance sheets and targets achieved. We simply hope to instigate reflection on the effects of the imaginary of development.

The articles by González and Montero (2020) and Ramírez (2020) both highlight the centrality of the entrepreneur as the star protagonist of development programmes. In his analysis of large successful horticultural producers, Ramírez examines the governance of development, observing how it is anchored in patronage networks that end up shaping territories in the image of the 'great men' at the forefront of entrepreneurialism, and who do not necessarily plough back the profits of development for the collective benefit. Entrepreneurialism is individual, and therefore does not always produce collective good. González and Montero examine these entrepreneurship policies in relation to groups of young people. It is paradoxical that development and depopulation can coexist, especially when it is the young who are leaving; in other words, development does not generate rootedness. The attraction of rural spaces as places to settle does not tally with the managerial discourses based on the idea of a market full of opportunities, an idea barely recognised by rural populations, and whose hypothetical interest lies in extracting value rather than enhancing local value. This disjunction is even more offensive in light of the siren calls that should be attracting life projects from a key group in the struggle against depopulation: young, qualified women (Medina-Vicent, 2020). The young do not find their place in the entrepreneurial narrative, and their key role in demographic revitalisation is not effectively taken into account and articulated among the various administrative bodies involved. Neither do they find a life project that interests them in the opportunities offered by the local development models. These two opening articles alert us to the significant departure from development policy objectives on conditions of social welfare.



In his article, Jiménez (2020) explores the instruments for designing and evaluating policies. This is a central issue in the shift towards rural proofing and the rural lens in integrating rural communities into social policies. Mainstreaming approaches, like rural proofing or rural lens, require all public policies to be examined in terms of their effects on rural populations. Although some of the ambivalences and limitations of these formula have been analysed (Shortall and Alston, 2016; Sherry and Shortall, 2019), they require a determined political will on the part of legislators and planners to minimise and prevent the collateral effects of major policies on rural areas. There is an intention to attend to the diversity of habitat and territory, but, as Jiménez shows in this special issue, the major indicators of sustainability, human development and general challenges have not been addressed from the rural perspective. In diverse spheres of social sustainability, the participation of residents living in the area (Querol and Ginés, 2020) can provide a more detailed picture, through their specific experience, contextualisation of the territory and review of past actions, thus offering a projection for the future with greater potential and guarantee of success. When indicators are deficient or inappropriate, rural issues continue to remain invisible.

Numerous actors play a role in development, however, not only entrepreneurs. In their contribution, Selusi and Sanahuja (2020) examine the role of teachers in rural schools and uncover the deliberate conscious efforts of teachers in producing and developing local and regional identities. Not only do they adapt the curricular content, but they are also expected to be firmly connected to the area and committed to the community. Their reflections likely come as no surprise –firmly rooted teachers nurture firmly rooted students– but beyond this observation, the sources of the production and reproduction of identity that constitute the raw materials of the economies of signs and that underpin the multifunctional modes of rural development must also be made visible. In this sense, rural schools embrace a multitude of symbolic dimensions ranging from their strength to project towards the future above and beyond the drama of critical demographic situations, to their capacity to condense positive educational models. Having overcome the longstanding call to build an “urbanising” school (Feu i Soler, 2002), schools must now face the challenge of social and cultural inclusion as they open up connections with the surrounding area and the community. The future for rural communities will be diverse and cosmopolitan (Woods, 2018), and calls for welcoming strategies (Sampeiro and Camarero, 2018) in which teachers’ connections with the area can play a key role.

Nogueira (2020) closes these reflections on the direction for policies. We have highlighted the problems of inadequate focus of policy objectives, incomplete indicators and lack of recognition of the main players. The collective challenge –citizen production– completes this list. In her article, Nogueira points to the lack of civic commitment in policies. Her study of agricultural modernisation in the case of Argentina identifies policies that ignore domestic structures in favour of large production consortiums, but that also ignore the consumer. These policies are highly productive in terms of accumulation and market integration, but have a devastating effect on citizenship building, bringing about precisely what is not desirable: civic erosion. The growing trend in diverse political systems towards disaffection with institutions is also reflected in rural areas, where economic aspects are receiving increasingly exclusive attention, while the creation of spaces for collective association and participation in policies is sidelined. In Spain too, analysis of the mechanisms for generating citizen involvement and leadership in rural areas –through the LEADER projects– shows a decline in their effectiveness and legitimacy (Esparcia, Escribano and Serrano, 2015).

In sum, depopulation –the decline of rural areas– is simply the expression of the lack of territorial cohesion and social inequality. These articles reveal how, sometimes, small differences can lead to large distances. Their analyses show the diversity of policies and their impact on rural areas. There is a need to refocus and come up with new indicators, integrate actors who are left out of the entrepreneurial ecosystem, and above all, re-establish the objectives of development to overcome the rural divide. This is the challenge facing public policies: to ensure a level playing field so rural areas can be fully incorporated into our public collective welfare system.



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