

NOTES

Rural development through remote working in regions rich in rural tourism resources -3-.

The case of Guadalajara, Cuenca
and Toledo rural areas in (post) pandemic Spain.

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1. The depopulation problem:

- The depopulated Castilla La Mancha region.

When the total population of a country has more than quadruple in the last two hundred years, but a region of the same country has a lower population than two centuries ago, we can say, quoting John Wyndham in his masterpiece of terror, *there is something seriously wrong somewhere*. The population of Spain, around 11 million at the beginning of the XIX century (Nicolau, R., 2005), has reached 49 million⁽¹⁾ in 2025. Cuenca, one of the regions targeted in this research notes, a vibrant region two centuries ago with a population of more than three hundred and thirty thousand (Medina, X. S. & Medina, M. S., 2023), has less than two hundred thousand in 2021.

Economic modernization and concentration of the population around the new non-rural economic sectors are two processes that go hand in hand. In the case of England and Wales this process took more than two hundred years, and half a century in France, but it only took three decades in Spain (Collantes, G. F., 2007). The process of rural depopulation in Spain started in

1950. That year 527 474 people were registered as living in Toledo province, Guadalajara province had a population of 203 278 and 335 719 lived in Cuenca province. In 1981, Toledo province had a population of 447 321, Guadalajara province had a population of 143 403 and 216 046 lived in Cuenca province. In the case of Toledo and Guadalajara provinces, the population reached again the 1950 level in the year 2000, when 527 965 were registered as living in Toledo province and 203 259 in Guadalajara province. This increase in population continues in 2024, with a small period of population loss (2018-2021, Toledo province; 2016-2021, Guadalajara province). Cuenca province, although registered an increase in population between 1988 and 2011, continued its demographic downward spiral and never reached the level of population it once had.

2. Rural development and rural tourism in Castilla La Mancha.

The Information and Tourism Ministry was created in 1951, a year after the emigration movement from the rural parts of inner Spain to the economic centers started. The tourism policies implemented by this Ministry, whose aim was to acquire as much foreign currency as possible to channel it to the economic transformation of the country, concentrated the tourism activities on the coastal parts of Spain (Canoves, G., Blanco-Romero, A., Vera-Rebollo, J.F., & María Prat, J., 2017). The rural inner parts of Spain, like Castilla La Mancha, were left behind by these policies and, also, by the economic plans that started in 1959. The 1959 economic plan, and its subsequent plans and policies, concentrated the investment in just a few hubs, none in Castilla La Mancha. The modernization of the agricultural sector, the structure of land ownership and the proximity of two growing economic hubs, Madrid and Valencia, accelerated the depopulation of Castilla La Mancha.

At the beginning of the 1980s, tourism had become one of the economic strategic sectors of the country, but it was still concentrated on the coastal areas and targeted low-income tourists. Castilla La Mancha was, then, on the

periphery of the tourism economic sector. By the time Spain became a member state, 1986, the agrarian policies that the European Union had been implementing were reaching the end of its run. By the end of the 1980s, the effects of the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) were mainly three: surplus of agricultural products, environmental problems, and a failure in preventing the depopulation of the rural parts of the member states. In the 1990s CAP was reorganized and the LEADER program started. This program aimed at revitalizing the non-agrarian part of the rural economy as a way of preventing further depopulation and, if successful, as a way of reverting the demographic problem of the rural areas. The rural tourism sector of Castilla La Mancha, which amounts to 7.3% of the PIB of the region and more than 8% of the workers in 2024, was created in no small part thanks to the LEADER I and its subsequent and related programs (Engelmo Moriche, E., 2022).

3. The case of Guadalajara, Cuenca and Toledo rural areas in (post) pandemic Spain (2024).

The rural tourism sector that started in the 1990s preceded by a few years the reorganization of the national tourism policies. The coastal regions were suffering from overtourism and targeted mainly low-income tourism. The new national tourism plans focused on cultural tourism and city tourism outside the coastal regions. This change benefited Castilla La Mancha, an inner region with an immense cultural heritage.

Guadalajara, Toledo and Cuenca are the three provinces of Castilla La Mancha region closest to Madrid, the third largest urban conglomerate of Europe, only behind London and Paris in scale and influence (Albertos Puebla, J.M & Sánchez Hernández, J.L., 2017). Between 1996 and 2008 the population movement from Madrid and its closest cities to the periphery of Madrid province made parts of Guadalajara and Toledo provinces into *de facto* areas under the direct economic influence of Madrid (Secretaría, 2024). Nevertheless, although the rural tourism sector and its contribution to the regional

PIB keeps growing, those rural parts not linked to Madrid and its large logistic sector keep suffering from depopulation, ageing and masculinization.

3.1.1 Local Action Groups (LAGs) targeted.

Of the 20 Local Action Groups active in Toledo, Guadalajara and Cuenca provinces, only those that have invested in ICT (Information and Communication Technology) and remote working have been targeted: *ADAC (Asociación para el Desarrollo de La Alcarria y La Campiña*; Guadalajara), *FADETA (Federación de Asociaciones para el Desarrollo Territorial del Tajo-Tajuña*; Guadalajara), *CEDER (Centro de Desarrollo Rural Alcarria conquense*; Cuenca), and *ADC (Asociación para el Desarrollo de la Comarca de Talavera, Sierra de San Vicente y La Jara*; Toledo).

3.1.2 Research methodology

As previously (López Jara, S., 2023), the methodology adopted here is similar to that used in other studies of rural areas of Spain (Arévalo, A.B., 2012; Esparcia, J., Escribano, J. & Buciega, A., 2016; Esparcia, J., Escribano, J. & Serrano, J., 2015). First, the so-called “*grey literature*” published by the LAGs was reviewed and used to improve the quality of the planned fieldwork. Second, fieldwork and interviews on-site were conducted in August of 2024 to allow a meaningful qualitative analysis. The questions relevant to this research are the same. First, whether there has been a change, be it positive or negative, in the remote work situation of the targeted LAGS during and after the pandemic; second, whether the changes in the remote work situation had any influence on the allocation of funds by said LAGs, be it positive or negative.

3.2 Local Action Group 1. *ADAC, Asociación para el Desarrollo de La Alcarria y La Campiña (Guadalajara)*.

Of the 52 municipalities⁽²⁾ that are part of this LAG, 27 have a larger population in 2021 than in 1996. The population of this region, 14 834 in 1996,

reached 50 344 in 2021. This remarkable increase has not been evenly distributed. It is concentrated around the economic area of the Corredor del Henares⁽³⁾ and the newly developed parts of already existing municipalities that targeted commuters from Madrid that wanted to live closer to nature and in single family houses⁽⁴⁾. The distance to the provincial capital, Guadalajara, varies from less than 9 Km (Marchamalo) to 90 Km (El Cardoso de la Sierra). The southern part of this region has easy access to Guadalajara, Madrid, public services and leisure activities. From the northern part, a mountainous region, commuting, access to public services and leisure are time consuming activities because of the low intensity of the public transportation network.

The population density of this region, 14 people per square kilometer in 1996, is 47 per square kilometer in 2021. Nevertheless, the population increase is concentrated mainly in seven of the 52 municipalities. 70% of the municipalities of this region have less than 500 inhabitants and suffer from continuous population loss, ageing and masculinization⁽⁵⁾.

This region has two very distinct areas. The aged, depopulated and extremely masculinized mountainous north, where municipalities have less than 500 inhabitants and the road network is difficult to traverse, and the economically vibrant and growing south with easy access to Guadalajara and Madrid. The northern region is the most attractive from a rural tourism point of view and is where most of the rural tourist establishments are located. The southern part follows the plain of the Henares River and is located in the area of influence of the Corredor del Henares, one of the most important logistic hubs of Spain. Here is where most of the work in the secondary and tertiary sector is located.

3.2.1. Remote work in ADAC region.

The strategic plan of ADAC for the 2014-2020 LEADER program included as one of the main initiatives the improvement of the commercial usage of ICT on the region. Before the pandemic there were four projects

related to ICT that received funding. Two were projects for improving the network accessibility (project number L1904.0.192.04.055 and L1904.1.192.03.013), and two were online shops (project number L1904.1.192.03.006 and L1904.1.192.03.020). After the pandemic there were five projects that received funding; three were projects for improving network accessibility (project number L1904.1.192.03.097, L1904.1.192.03.085 and L1904.1.192.03.097), one was an online shop (project number L1904.1.192.03.006) and one was a coworking space where remote working is possible (project number L1904.0.192.04.084).

3.3 Local Action Group 2. *FADETA, Federación de Asociaciones para el Desarrollo Territorial del Tajo-Tajuña (Guadalajara)*.

Of the 41 municipalities that form part of this LAG⁽⁶⁾, 6 have a larger population in 2021 than in 1996. Nevertheless, that increase in population is almost negligible⁽⁷⁾. The population of this region, 13 910 in 1996, is 10 921 in 2021. The distance to the provincial capital, Guadalajara, varies from less than 8 Km (Escamilla) to more than 85 Km (Castilforte). Commuting, access to public services and leisure are time consuming activities because of the low intensity of the public transportation network.

The population density of this region, already as little as 7 people per square kilometer in 1996, is less than 6 in 2021. This region suffers from extreme depopulation (only 4 municipalities have more than 350 inhabitants), ageing and masculinization⁽⁸⁾. As in so many rural areas, despite the abundance of empty houses, some of them in a state of decay, the owners do not feel the pressure to sell them at a price according to the purchasing power of the local population and, as a consequence, access to housing is extremely difficult.

With an average altitude of 930 meters above sea level, low round mountains in the northeast (1222 meters the highest one), river plains in the south (as low as 639 meters above sea level), several lakes and swimmable rivers, hiking courses, pine forests, lavender fields, rich monumental heritage and highly valued gastronomical products, this is a popular rural tourism destina-

tion with more than 50 rural tourism establishments. Return tourism, the tourism activities of native population that emigrated to the big cities but still have properties in the region, are also an important part of the tourism industry.

3.3.1. Remote work in *FADETA* region.

Before the pandemic, one project for improving the network accessibility of the region (Ensinca Networks, S.L., Equipamiento de telecomunicaciones) and one shop with online purchasing service (Las cosas de mi hermana S.L.) received funding. During the pandemic, the population of the region increased when native born population living in the big cities returned to spend the lockdown periods in their second residences and work remotely from there. The sudden increase in population caused problems for the municipalities providing the essential services. After the pandemic, one project for improving the network accessibility of the region received funding (SDC Internet vía radio con velocidad de fibra) and the cooperation with other LAGs and regional programs for improving ICT usage and remote working improved (Emprende-T, i4CAMHUB, and ITECAM cooperation programs).

3.4 Local Action Group 3. *CEDER Alcarria conquense* (Cuenca).

Of the 41 municipalities that are part of this LAG⁽⁹⁾, only one has a larger population in 2021 than in 1996⁽¹⁰⁾. The population of this region, 12 238 in 1996, is 8 334 in 2021. The distance to the provincial capital, Cuenca, varies from 23 km (Bascuñana de San Pedro) to 124 km (Cañaveruelas). As in other rural areas with depopulation related problems, commuting, access to public services and leisure are time consuming activities because of the low intensity of the public transportation network.

The population density of the region, a meager 4.9 people per square kilometer in 1996, is only 3.3 in 2021. This region suffers from extreme depopulation (only 6 municipalities have more than 350 inhabitants), ageing and masculinization⁽¹¹⁾. Access to housing is also a problem for the same reasons

pointed previously. This region has established itself as a popular rural tourist destination especially in the niches of culture tourism (archaeological sites and religious architecture) and nature tourism (hiking courses, swimmable rivers, the biggest artificial lake in Spain, caves). Return tourism is also an important part of the rural tourism industry.

3.4.1 Remote work in *CEDER* region.

Before the pandemic there were no remote work-related projects. During the pandemic, as happened in the FADETA region, the second houses owned by native born population living in the big cities were used to spend the lockdown periods and work remotely from there. After the pandemic, one CIT related project, a rural coworking space that had been in preparation since at least 2016, opened. Also, one of the municipalities of the region, Huete, became a member of a national network of villages that promote remote working (Red Nacional de Pueblos Acogedores para el Teletrabajo). A project to promote remote working among the consumers of return tourism in the region also started after the pandemic⁽¹²⁾.

3.5 Local Action Group 4. *ADC, Asociación para el Desarrollo de la Comarca de Talavera, Sierra de San Vicente y La Jara (Toledo).*

Of the 38 municipalities⁽¹³⁾ that are part of this LAG, 12 have a larger population in 2021 than in 1996⁽¹⁴⁾. The population of this region, 26 531 in 1996, is 27 738 in 2021. The distance to the provincial capital, Toledo, varies from 54 km (Cebolla) to 149 (Mohedas de la Jara). The municipality of Talavera de la Reina (83 477 inhabitants in 2021) is located at the center of this region. This municipality is one of the more economically active parts of Castilla La Mancha region⁽¹⁵⁾ and functions as the closest provider of second and third sector employment. Talavera de la Reina is the main center for leisure, access to public services and is the regional hub for the public transportation network. From the municipalities with easy access to Talavera de la Reina and the A-5 highway, commuting, access to public services and leisure are

activities that do not require an excessive amount of time.

The population density of the region, 11.9 people per square kilometer in 2021, is almost the same as in 1996, when it was 11.4. Eight of the municipalities of this LAG are in fact almost part of the urban periphery of Talavera de la Reina and suffer from masculinization⁽¹⁶⁾ and ageing but not depopulation. The rest of the municipalities suffer from masculinization⁽¹⁷⁾, ageing, extreme depopulation and what is called in Spain “*Economía sumergida*”, which are economic activities that are legal if properly reported but are illegal because they are not reported properly to the relevant administration, for example, working 8 hours a day with a 4 hours a day contract and receive the extra 4 hours worked in not reported, hence not taxed, cash. Although this region lacks a coordinated policy to coordinate all its tourism resources, rural tourism is the economic sector that has grown the most since 2014 (51.71% of the people work in the tourist sector in 2021) and there are more than 70 rural tourism establishments.

3.5.1 Remote work in ADC region.

Before the pandemic there were no remote work-related projects. After the pandemic one project to improve the connectivity of the region (Ayto. de Garciotum, 45643, Kit tecnológico y de comunicación para videoconferencias) and one coworking space⁽¹⁸⁾ received funding.

4. Closing remarks.

In this research notes, first, I have succinctly presented the rural depopulation problem in the Castilla La Mancha region and the policies taken to try to alleviate and revert it. Then I have presented the main problems facing the rural parts of the three provinces targeted, Guadalajara, Cuenca and Toledo. Thirdly, I have presented the main problems and characteristics of the targeted LAGs and the remote work situation before and after the pandemic. Here I will present the closing remarks.

4.1 Rural development through remote working in regions rich in rural tourism resources -3- The case of Guadalajara, Cuenca and Toledo rural regions-

It seems that return tourism, the tourism activities that native born and descendants of native-born emigrants to the big cities do while spending time in their second residence on the region, is one of the key factors related to how the remote work situation evolved. Theoretically, three kinds of patterns could have emerged: barely any changes, some changes, and dramatic changes. All the regions targeted registered some kind of positive change. FADETA and CEDER regions registered positive changes. The number of ITC and remote working projects, and the cooperation with other LAGs, augmented in both regions. ADAC and ADC regions registered even more positive changes, and both regions provided funds for coworking spaces where remote work is possible.

4.2 Next step

The research notes presented here are part of a multiyear research endeavor that started in 2022 made possible thanks to the support granted by the Japan Society for the Promotion of Science (JSPS KAKENHI 22K12611). In the next step, the Local Action Groups of Castilla y León farthest from Madrid that are part of the rural coworking network of Castilla y León (COWOCYL) will be the focus of the investigation.

Notes

- (1) Except when a different source is quoted, all the population data has been taken from the periodical surveys implemented by INE (National Statistics Institute).
- (2) Alarilla, Aldeanueva de Guadalajara, Atanzón, Cañizar, Casa de Uceda, El Casar, El Cardoso de la Sierra, Campillo de Ranas, Casas de San Galindo, Caspueñas, Ciruelas, Copernal, El Cubillo de Uceda, Espinosa de Henares, Fontanar, Fuencemillán, Fuentelahiguera de Albatages, Galápagos, Heras de Ayuso, Hita, Humanes, Majaclarayo, Málaga del Fresno, Malaguilla, Marchamalo, Matarrubia, Miralrío, Mohernando, Montarrón, Muduex, Puebla de Beleña, Quer, Robledillo de Mohernando, Taragudo, Torija, Torre del Burgo, Torrejón del Rey, Tórtola de Henares, Tor-

- tuero, Trijueque, Uceda, Valdearenas, Valdeavellano, Valdeaveruelo, Valdegrudas, Valdenuño – Fernández, Valdepeñas de la Sierra, Villanueva de Argecilla, Villanueva de la Torre, Villaseca de Uceda, Viñuelas, Yunquera de Henares.
- (3) Torija (382 in 1996, 1577 in 2021), Tórtola de Henares (399 in 1996, 1240 in 2021), Fontanar (902 in 1996, 2523 in 2021), Yunquera de Henares (2041 in 1996, 4364 in 2021) and Trijueque (570 in 1996, 1327 in 2021).
- (4) El Casar (2222 in 1996, 12710 in 2021), Galápagos (230 in 1996, 2579 in 2021), Torrejón del Rey (814 in 1996, 5892 in 2021), Valdeaveruelo (234 in 1996, 1144 in 2021), Villanueva de la Torre (330 in 1996, 6591 in 2021) and Quer (107 in 1996, 921 in 2021). These “new” old municipalities, where the newly developed parts dwarf the traditional old town center, are characteristic of the third wave of population movement (1996 - financial crisis of 2008) from Madrid and its closest cities to the periphery of Madrid province (Nello, O., 2017).
- (5) In 2021, more than half the population (51.81%) of the 27 municipalities that registered an increase in population was male. The rate of male population for the municipalities that didn't have an increase in population since, at least, 1996, is much worse: 57.18%. The average for Castilla La Mancha region for the same period is 50.06%. The national average for the same period is 48.9%. Data taken from periodical surveys implemented by INE (National Statistics Institute).
- (6) Alcocer, Alique, Almadrones, Alocen, Argecilla, Auñón, Barriopedro, Berninches, Brihuega, Budia, Castilforte, Centenera, Chillarón del Rey, Cifuentes, Cogollor, Durón, El Olivar, Escamilla, Gajanejos, Henche, Irueste, Ledanca, Lupiana, Mantiel, Masegoso de Tajuña, Millana, Pareja, Peñalver, Peralveche, Romanones, Sacedón, Salmerón, San Andrés del Rey, Solanillos del Extremo, Tendilla, Trillo, Utande, Valderrebollo, Valfermoso de Tajuña, Yélamos de Abajo, Yélamos de Arriba.
- (7) Alcocer (300 inhabitants in 1996, 326 in 2021), Alocen (156 in 1996, 161 in 2021), Castilforte (53 in 1996, 60 in 2021), Centenera (75 in 1996, 143 in 2021), Henche (77 in 1996, 89 in 2021), and Irueste (75 in 1996, 82 in 2021).
- (8) In 2021 53.7% of the population was male. The average for Castilla La Mancha region for the same period is 50.06%. The national average for the same period is 48.9%. Data taken from periodical surveys implemented by INE (National Statistics Institute).
- (9) Albalate de las Nogueras, Albendea, Alcantud, Alcohujate, Arandilla del Arroyo, Arrancacepas, Barajas de Melo, Bascañana de San Pedro, Buciegas, Buendia, Canalejas del Arroyo, Cañaveras, Cañaveruelas, Castejón, Castillo de Albaráñez, Gascuña, Huete, La Peraleja, Leganiel, Olmeda de la Cuesta, Olmedilla de Eliz, Pineda de Cigüela, Portalrubio de Guadamejud, Priego, Saceda Trasierra, Salmeroncillos, San Pedro Palmiches, Tinajas, Torralba, Torrejoncillo del Rey, Valdecolmenas, Valdeolivas, Vellisca, Villaconejos de Trabaque, Villalba del Rey, Villanueva de Guadamejud, Villar de Domingo García, Villar del Infantado, Villarejo de la Peñuela, Villar y Velasco, Vindel.

- (10) Barajas de Melo (719 inhabitants in 1996, 1005 in 2021).
- (11) In 2021 53.6% of the population was male. The average for Castilla La Mancha region for the same period is 50.06%. The national average for the same period is 48.9%. Data taken from periodical surveys implemented by INE (National Statistics Institute).
- (12) <https://www.huete.org/wp/?p=12714>
- (13) Alcaudete de la Jara, Aldeanueva de Barbarroya, Aldeanueva de San Bartolomé, Almendral de la Cañada, Belvis de la Jara, Buenaventura, Campillo de la Jara, Cardiel de los Montes, Castillo de Bayuela, Cazalegas, Cebolla, Cervera de los Montes, Espinoso del Rey, Garciotún, Hinojosa de San Vicente, La Estrella, La Iglesuela, La Pueblanueva, Las Herencias, Los Cerralbos, Lucillos, Marrupe, Mohedas de la Jara, Montearagón, Nava de Ricomalillo, Navamorcuende, Nuño Gómez, Pelahustán, Pepino, Puerto de San Vicente, Real de San Vicente, Retamoso, Robledo del Mazo, San Román de los Montes, Sartajada, Sevilleja de la Jara, Sotillo de las Palomas, Torrecilla de la Jara.
- (14) Cardiel de los Montes (127 inhabitants in 1996, 380 in 2021), Cazalegas (1177 in 1996, 1854 in 2021), Cebolla (2810 in 1996, 3204 in 2021), Cervera de los Montes (428 in 1996, 3204 in 2021), Garciotún (160 in 1996, 206 in 2021), La Pueblanueva (986 in 1996, 2169 in 2021), Las Herencias (727 in 1996, 742 in 2021), Lucillos (515 in 1996, 591 in 2021), Marrupe (122 in 1996, 154 in 2021), Montearagón (479 in 1996, 522 in 2021), Pepino (787 in 1996, 3060 in 2021) and San Román de los Montes (596 in 1996, 1696 in 2021).
- (15) In Spain, Madrid and Barcelona metropolitan areas are the most active economic centers. They are followed in importance by the metropolitan areas of Valencia, Sevilla, Zaragoza, Bilbao and Malaga. In a third level and functioning as regional economic centers are 35 municipalities, all over 50 000 inhabitants, most of them provincial capitals. In Castilla La Mancha region this regional economic centers are the municipalities of Albacete, Cuenca, Toledo, Guadalajara, Ciudad Real, Puerto Llano and Talavera de la Reina. This municipalities sum more than 700 000 inhabitants, close to 37.5% of the total population of Castilla La Mancha region. (Lois González, R.C. & Piñeira Mantinán, M.J., 2017)
- (16) Cazalegas, Cebolla, Los Cerralbos, Lucillos, Montearagón, Pepino, La Pueblanueva, and San Román de los Montes. In 2021 51.3% of the population of this municipalities was male. The average for Castilla La Mancha region for the same period is 50.06%. The national average for the same period is 48.9%. Data taken from periodical surveys implemented by INE (National Statistics Institute).
- (17) In 2021 52.7% of the population was male. The average for Castilla La Mancha region for the same period is 50.06%. The national average for the same period is 48.9%. Data taken from periodical surveys implemented by INE (National Statistics Institute).
- (18) <https://coworkingcomarcadelajara.wordpress.com/2023/08/24/fomento-del-teletrabajo/>

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