

LONG-TERM VISION FOR RURAL AREAS



Contribution of the SSPA Network to the European Commission

November 2020



SSPA Network: Southern Sparsely Populated Areas

It puts together **five provinces** (NUTS3 level) with a population density below 12.5 inhab./km², and therefore considered sparsely populated. These areas are: Cuenca, Soria and Teruel (Spain), Lika-Senj (Croatia) and Evrytania (Greece).

The fundamental objective of the network is to promote **policies and specific measures that contribute to face the main structural challenges in demographic, economic and social matters** that they affect the less populated rural regions of Europe. To do it, SSPA collaborates with the public administrations and the main socioeconomic actors in the territory.

It is registered in the EU Transparency Register: No. 478256433575-07. Furthermore, at the European level, SSPA is part of **RUMRA & Smart Villages**, the European Parliament Intergroup on sparsely populated, mountainous and remote rural areas.

The network considers that the EU should articulate measures that seek to achieve true cohesion, integration, inclusion and sustainability for these territories, taking into account the social and political aspects. With that goal in mind, **a series of measures are proposed to successfully address the demographic challenge for rural areas**, particularly sparsely populated areas and territories with severe and permanent demographic disabilities.

Our vision of the rural area paradigm

SSPA advocates considering rural areas as highly successful and competitive territories in which more and more people choose to live, work, study and invest. In this sense, the strategy should establish missions and provisions creating the following **indispensable conditions** in all rural areas:

1. To provide **basic infrastructure and equipment** and access to essential supplies in affordable and quality conditions.
2. To offer **affordable and quality housing**.
3. To make available **basic services for the population** and adequate access to them in a time factor, both in terms of public services - educational, health, administrative and social-, as well as local commercial activities or a certain cultural offer and leisure.
4. To **connect via internet broadband**, mobile telephony, to guarantee quality communications and mobility and adequate benefits.
5. To create a **regulatory framework** consistent with the realities and needs of the rural environment, from taxation to the management of natural resources.
6. To generate and support **entrepreneurial attitudes** to retain talent and attract entrepreneurs through appropriate opportunities and incentives.
7. To generate and train **qualified workers** with the capacity to retain and attract exogenous human capital through the offer of job opportunities.

The challenge is to go beyond our current rural development model, which has basically focused on agricultural development, and adopt another. In the new model, it must be considered that the capacity to retain population alone and boost the rural economy of the primary sector is insufficient, for this reason **the secondary and tertiary sectors of the economy in rural areas must also be developed with determination**. The impact that the approach of the processing industry to the fields would have would not only be economic, but also environmental, with a reduction in emissions from the transport of raw materials to the processing companies.

This approach must include key elements such as **smart, inclusive and sustainable growth**, bringing rural territories into the 21st century. In addition, the need or the advantages of promoting the **social economy** should be considered as a key point of innovative sectors of rural society, especially in caring for the elderly and dependents, renewable energy or attention to the specific needs of rural communities.

1. A legal and operational definition of depopulated areas

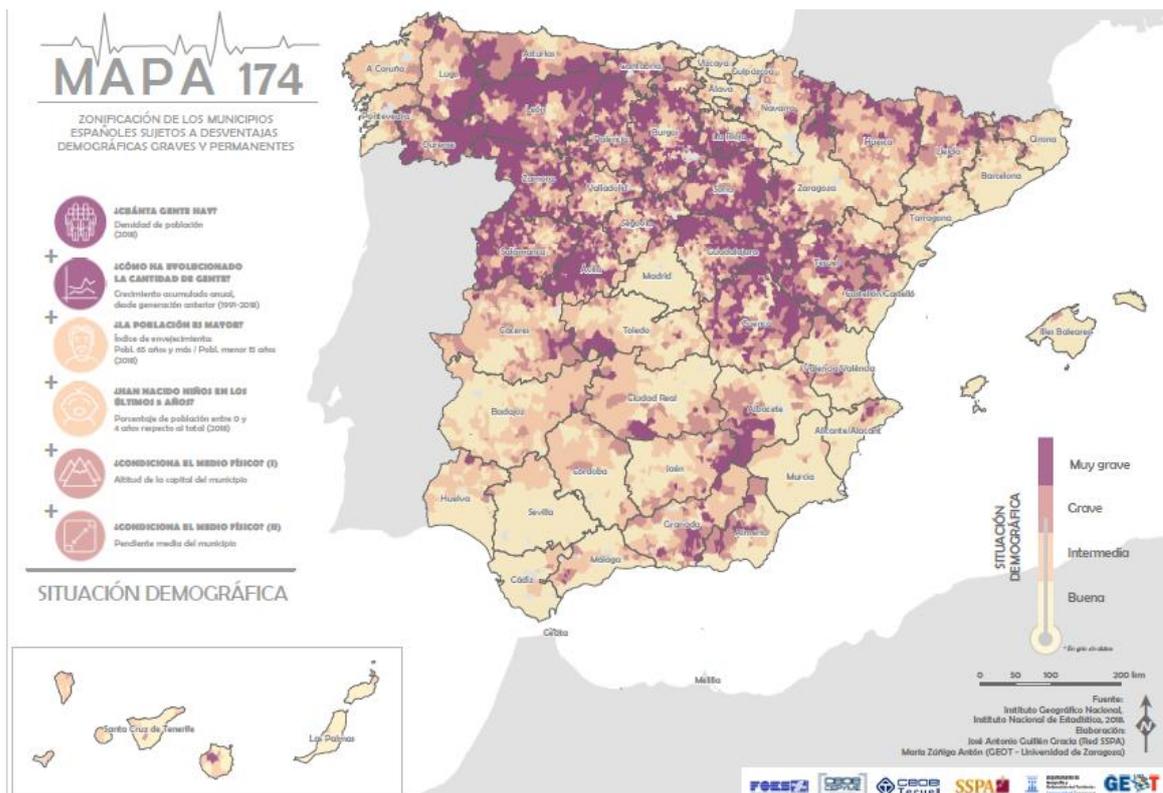
The SSPA requires a legally elaborated and politically binding definition of what should be understood as areas with severe and permanent demographic disabilities and sparsely populated areas. To define these areas, article 174 TFEU must be taken into account in order to implement its mandatory provisions through its actual application. This definition is necessary to create **specific lines** in the funds, in order to provide answers to the problems that affect these territories. In addition, it can also be used as a basis to define the most fragile areas that serve as a reference when **applying the “Rural Proofing”**, in legislative and regulatory measures.

From the SSPA network, we have outlined 6 parameters that try to define depopulation at the municipal level (LAU2) to assess the structural nature of these disadvantages and define if the area is in a good, intermediate, serious or very serious situation:

- the annual accumulated growth, from the previous generation (1991-2018);
- Population density (2018);
- Population Index >65 over population <15 (2018);
- Percentage of the population between 0 and 4 years old (2018);
- Altitude of the municipality;
- Average slope of the municipality.

All the variables are equally weighted, the intervals are proportional and are based on current standards and without artificial territorial aggregations. Below, we present the **map initially drawn up for the case of Spain**, even if the proposal is designed to be applied in the territorial demographic diagnosis of the entire EU.

Image 1. Map 174 (Spain)



Source: Map 174, made by the SSPA network

2. A universal and quality access to telecommunications.

One of the priority objectives to be achieved in terms of connectivity is universal access. SSPA considers it essential that universal and quality access is guaranteed, available to all citizens, regardless of where they live or are on time.

The health crisis situation caused by COVID-19, introduced restrictions on the mobility of people and the exercise of numerous economic and commercial activities, in addition to making citizens see the unviability of large cities and looking for an alternative in other less populated areas. A change of place of residence is taking place, but, in many cases, maintaining jobs, thanks to the option of teleworking. Sparsely populated and rural territories have an opportunity to guarantee the right to education, the right to work and freedom of residence in this new context, but it is necessary to provide the best telecommunications. For this reason, the provision of services of 5G electronic communications must prioritize areas that lack coverage or with poor coverage, through the necessary infrastructure and the provision of quality service at affordable costs. We should leave behind the concept of population coverage and start talking about **coverage of the territory**.

In addition, we propose to “**package territories**”, that is to say that in all 5G calls, companies that present themselves for deployment in provinces with a density greater than 500 inhab./km² are obliged to cover with the same speed and the same prices in the sparsely populated provinces, with a density less than 12.5 inhab./km², reaching at least

80% of the territory. The objective of this obligation is to make the profitability of the operators compatible with the positioning of these provinces in the field of telecommunications and in relation to the rest of the territories. It also seeks to bring these areas together territorially, correcting the digital divide that has been created, and which will be impossible to overcome if conditions such as the previous one are not set in advance.

Households are the base unit to estimate the coverage of a municipality, but we must not forget the **business parks** that have specific characteristics in terms of: lower concentration of potential customers; higher cost of technology deployment compared to urban centers; the service that companies need, in many cases, is high speed. Business parks in sparsely populated and rural areas are often excluded by calls and grants for deployment from public administrations and operators. However, it is of great importance that the companies in these areas, many of them small or medium-sized, as well as the self-employed, are able to compete in the best possible conditions in the markets in which they operate. For this, it is essential that they be able to have good services of any technology that meets the required speed, so it is necessary that they be included in the scope of action of the operators that would be covered if the aforementioned territory packages were included.

3. Legislation that takes into account rural impact.

It is necessary to have legislation that understands and assumes the extreme disparity of conditions existing between the most vulnerable rural areas and the urban environment to ensure the basic conditions required for the economic and social revitalization of the rural environment. From SSPA we have always highlighted the need to legislate from the awareness of this situation. It can be said that, with few exceptions, we legislate for city dwellers, not village dwellers.

The effects that this has on rural areas, especially in its most vulnerable and degraded areas, is increasingly evident and negative. We consider that the recent example of the measures taken in the framework of the state of alarm decreed in response to the Covid-19 pandemic. The way in which this framework affects small rural areas is just a sample of the many other measures and regulations adopted over the last decades that have not taken into account the harsh and ignored reality that explains the decline of these territories.

We know that the European Commission, responding to the Cork 2.0 Declaration that called for the adoption of the “**Rural Proofing**”, is already working on this matter to study its implementation in European legislative processes. But we want to emphasize that this mechanism should have **a participatory character for civil society**, both in the rural impact assessment of the laws and regulations in force, as the affected party, as well as those to be adopted in the future. This mechanism should also cover other aspects closely linked to the impact of the regulations, such as the interpretative practices and criteria of the different authorities when applying the regulations.

4. Real funds for rural areas.

Outside the framework of the Common Agricultural Policy, the absorption of funding from EU funds and programs in rural areas is much weaker than that which occurs with projects and initiatives that are developed from urban areas. To facilitate the absorption of these funds with the least possible bureaucratic burden, the managing authorities usually issue calls that **set conditions and eligibility criteria that can rarely be met by entities and companies in depopulated areas**, although their objectives may have a notable impact in the challenges of these territories.

This makes them true “shadow areas” for the incentives to progress and investment, as they are initially excluded from the opportunities represented by these funds and programs. From this perspective, the launching of calls adapted to rural realities should be part of the “Rural Proofing” system that we have discussed in the previous section.

5. A change in the image of rural areas.

The rural and sparsely populated environment is often described as a territory without opportunities. This image makes people in big cities think that these areas are not a lifestyle choice. Furthermore, **this vision weakens the confidence** of the rural population in their prospects for life and prosperity in their homeland.

For this reason, it is important **to convey the reality and the advantages that rural areas offer in a different way**, promoting the treatment of this issue in the classroom, as well as its image in the media. This type of action is necessary **to influence the self-esteem** of members of rural communities, as well as **to boost economic activity and social commitment** through training in innovation for present and future generations.

Contact information:

Sara Bianchi

SSPA network Coordinator

sbianchi@sspa-network.eu

www.sspa-network.eu