

SUMMARY OF ARTICLE: doi: <http://dx.doi.org/10.12795/rea.2020.i39.02>

The Territorialisation of Social Inclusion Policies from the Perspective of the Spanish Rural Areas: Regional Comparative

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KEYWORDS

Social Policies
Rural Areas
Poverty
Social Exclusion
Social Inclusion

TOPIC AND OBJECTIVES

This article explores how the attention to social exclusion and poverty in rural areas is materialised in the plans for social inclusion in Spain.

The population in rural areas is very vulnerable to social exclusion processes due to four interconnected and overlapping dynamics related to i) the limited job market, ii) demographic processes of depopulation and ageing, iii) lack (or very limited) of education opportunities and iv) accessibility issues to essential services and adequate infrastructures (Bertolini, P., *et al.*, 2008; CES, 2008). The feedback of those dynamics results in a vicious circle of poverty and exclusion from which is very difficult to escape for many rural areas, particularly for the most vulnerable groups (Milbourne, P., 2010; Bock, B., *et al.*, 2015).

We study the policies on social inclusion developed in Spain seeking to establish which are the main actions addressed to rural areas. In Spain, social policies in general and in particular those addressed to tackle poverty, and social exclusion are a competence of the central government and the government of the Autonomous Communities (ACs).

Our objectives are two. First, to analyse the social inclusion policies existing in the ACs in order to establish the attention paid to rural areas. And second, to check if rural ACs have more specific actions for rural areas than urban ACs.



METHODS

We focus our analysis in the Social Inclusion Plans as they gather approaches, objectives and actions addressed to tackling poverty and social exclusion.

First, we identified and gathered the existing plans on social inclusion at national and AC level. Second, we performed a content analysis on the plans in order to identify the measures explicitly addressed to rural areas and to categorise them depending on their theme or field of action. Last, we compared the number, proportion and type of measures identified across rural and urban ACs. The comparison considers that social policies in Spain are a competence of the ACs which brings heterogeneity to the landscape. For this comparison, the ACs were classified as rural or urban using the criteria set by the OECD in 1994 based on the threshold of 150 inhabitants / square kilometre (Goerlich, F. J., *et al.*, 2016). According to these criteria, the Balearic Islands, Canary Islands, Basque Country, Madrid, Catalonia and Valencian Community are urban.

MAIN RESULTS

The resulting landscape of actions addressing social exclusion in rural areas is not homogeneous. The ACs were not at the same situation regarding the development of plans or strategies to coordinate the efforts addressing social exclusion at the moment in which this research was done (September 2018). While the majority of ACs had in force or recently finished some type of plan or strategy (cases of Asturias, Cantabria and Catalonia), some of them had very outdated tools (La Rioja and the Canary Islands), and others never had even developed one (Murcia and Baleares). Among the ACs that had an updated plan, Andalusia, Catalonia and Madrid, did not include any objective or measure explicitly addressed to rural areas.

The results of the comparative analysis deepen in the description of this diverse situation in fighting social exclusion. In total, we identified 117 actions across all the 13 ACs plans analysed, but they were not evenly distributed across ACs. 73.5% of the identified actions were set in predominantly rural ACs. Moreover, half of those measures are concentrated in only two ACs (Galicia and Castilla y León). Thus, there is an important degree of heterogeneity also among the rural ACs. In three rural ACs (Asturias, Navarra and Cantabria), the number actions specifically designed for rural areas is below the national average (5.2%), while in other four rural ACs (Castilla-La Mancha, Extremadura, Castilla y León and Aragón) the number of actions doubles the national average. It should be noted that the single ACs that includes more actions addressed to rural areas is the Valencian Community, which is classified as an urban region. It is worthy to highlight here that the Valencian plan includes an axis dedicated to territorial equity and is designed with an integrative and transversal perspective.

The urban-rural classification of the ACs does not predetermine the number of actions addressing social exclusion in rural areas. In relative terms, when looking at the proportion of measures addressed to rural areas upon the total of actions included in the plan, other considerations are relevant. On the one hand, among rural ACs, the relative proportion of specific actions is higher as the total number of actions tends to be lower: (see for example the cases of Castilla y León, Aragón, Extremadura, and Castilla-La Mancha). On the other hand, in the two urban ACs that include specific measures for rural areas (Valencian Community and Basque Country), the relative relevance of those measures is diluted (around 5%) due to the large number of actions included in their plans. In any case, we interpret these numbers as aligned to the social invisibility of social exclusion in rural areas that has already been highlighted by a number of authors (Commins, P., 2004; Bertolini, P., *et al.*, 2008; Bock, B., *et al.*, 2015; Bernard, J., *et al.*, 2019).

The thematic analysis of the measures dedicated explicitly to rural areas evidences the pre-eminence of aspects related to the following topics: regional development, education and training, support to specific groups, employment, extension of ICTs, energy poverty, housing, family and community intervention, and issues related to the governance and implementation of the policies (evaluation and administrative coordination and networking). However, 50% of the actions are focused on only three topics, which indicates the priorities and main lines of action in social inclusion policies. First, the territorial and socio-economic development and planning (18,8%) link to the idea that solving social needs that specific collectives (i.e. women,



young people and immigrants) might have relates to the wellbeing and quality of life standards available in the territory in general. Second, the measures addressed to the enhancement of capacities and employability through education and training (17.9%). Third, it is essential to pay specific attention to the specific needs of key vulnerable groups, particularly women and immigrants, but also people with disabilities, older people and children (14.53%), what requires the acknowledge of demographic and socio-cultural diversity in rural areas.

CONCLUSION

Social policies should incorporate the territorial perspective in their design or at least in the implementation in order to be effective and relevant against social exclusion in a rural area. Social policies in Spain specifically addressed to rural areas or at least with some capacity to act over them according to their demands and needs, are an exception. In the analysed ACs plans, the attention to rural areas appears only at the action level. There are no particular strategic axis or objectives for rural areas.

The decentralisation of the social policies should mean an opportunity to design and organise the social policy from a territorial approach. However, in general, this does not translate into complete and specific attention on rural realities in the different ACs. The fact that urban ACs barely acknowledge that poverty and social exclusion in rural areas have peculiarities that make them different from the counterpart processes in urban areas, cast a shadow upon the relevance of the measures implemented.

Having this into account is vital in a context in which many rural territories (particularly those experiencing depopulation and socio-economic issues) claim for policies and measures that attend better to their situations and needs. In the case of social exclusion, it is evident that the existing policy tools already have the capacity to tackle those specific issues. This might be the case of the social inclusion plans, but it would be necessary that they were prepared and implemented with a territorial approach.