

THE LACK OF ATTENTION GIVEN BY NEO- ENDOGENOUS RURAL DEVELOPMENT PRACTICE TO AREAS HIGHLY AFFECTED BY DEPOPULATION. THE CASE OF ANDALUSIA (SPAIN) IN 2015–2020 PERIOD

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Abstract: How are the problems of depopulation being faced by the Local Action Groups (LAGs) and the LEADER approach? What kinds of proposals are being pointed out to tackle young people's exodus, the economic depression, the physical and virtual distances, and the marginality from the political and economic centers by these local public-private partnerships to the areas having the more worrying situations? Andalusia, a southern region of Spain, has many municipalities with these severe depopulation problems. According to this aim, the Local Development Strategies documents (LDSs) of the LAGs for 2015–2020, have been reviewed. The predominance of the top-down approach has limited the attention given to face the rural depopulation. It is relevant to note, as well, the reduced presence of specific objectives and projects to combat depopulation in these deep rural areas. The last finding is that these municipalities with extreme depopulation have been left aside; as no solution placed. Definitely, as empty areas to promote rural development. Depopulation concept and depopulation areas have been forgotten for neo-endogenous rural development practices.

Keywords: neo-endogenous rural development practice, LEADER approach, demographic decline, sparsely populated rural areas, Local Action Groups, local development strategies, governance, Andalusia

Resumen: ¿Cómo se está afrontando estas problemáticas de la despoblación por parte de los Grupos de Acción Local (GAL) y el enfoque LEADER? ¿Qué tipo de propuestas se están apuntando para abordar el éxodo de los jóvenes, la depresión económica, las distancias físicas y virtuales, y la marginalidad respecto de los centros políticos y económicos de estos patrimonios público-privadas locales, de estos territorios que tienen situaciones más preocupantes? Andalucía, una región del sur de España, tiene muchos municipios con estos graves problemas de despoblación. De acuerdo con este objetivo, se han revisado los documentos de Estrategias de Desarrollo Local (EDL) de los GAL para 2015–2020. El predominio del enfoque de arriba hacia abajo ha limitado la atención prestada para enfrentar la despoblación rural. Es relevante señalar, además, la reducida presencia de objetivos y proyectos específicos para combatir la despoblación en estas zonas rurales profundas. El último hallazgo es que estos municipios con despoblación extrema se han dejado de lado; como lugares sin solución. Definitivamente, como espacios vacíos para promover el desarrollo rural. El concepto de despoblación y las áreas con estos problemas se han olvidado por parte de la práctica del desarrollo rural neoendógeno.

Palabras clave: práctica del desarrollo rural neo-endógeno, enfoque LEADER, declive demográfico, zonas rurales escasamente pobladas, Grupos de Acción Local, estrategias de desarrollo local, gobernanza, Andalucía

Highlights:

- Territories with extreme depopulation have been left aside for rural development.
- Inadaptation of neo-endogenous development to face problems of sparsely populated areas.
- The top-down approach limits the attention given to rural depopulation.
- Reduced mention to concrete objectives or projects to combat depopulation.
- Only in concrete territories, some creative proposals were pointed, but these had a minor role.

1. Introduction

The called “demographic challenge”, related to the loss of population and ageing, has become one of the most relevant problems of the European society, particularly for a massive number of rural areas (Woods, 2016), increasing the territorial inequalities. In rural areas, this phenomenon is, at the same time, a problem and a side effect of the loss of weight in the number of inhabitants, socio-economic relevance, and political protagonism of the inner areas. Those territories called deep rural areas by authors as Molinero (2019) or Woods (2016) are characterized by low population densities (less than ten inhab./km²), a continuous loss of inhabitants (municipalities with few numbers of the population, under 1,000 inhabitants), evident ageing of their population pyramids, increasing physical and virtual marginality, and an evident situation of economic dependence.

Since the 1990s, ruralist experts, as Kayser (1990) or García (2011), described the *rural renaissance* for all the rural areas in developed countries. However, it is obvious the vast differences and diversity of territories: periurban, mountain, deep ones, etc. Thus, Bock (2016), Del Molino (2016), Goerlich et al. (2016), Recaño (2017), and Molinero (2019), with different interpretations; focus the attention on the extreme disparities of rural territories, demanding more attention to deep and marginal rural areas. In our research, we studied the strategies framed inside of the LEADER approach, in each LAG and each or their Community-Led Local Development – CLLD. LEADER philosophy is designed to act in more detail in concrete rural territories across the European Union, adapting their proposals to these areas' specific circumstances and problematics, giving and special protagonism and involvement to local communities. This approach's specificities (territorial perspective; integrated and multisectoral actions, local decision making, bottom-up approach, innovation, LAGs – public/private partnerships, networking, and economic diversification) are circumscribed to the unique features of these areas. Also, in a theoretic perspective, the LEADER approach is inserted inside of the neo-endogenous rural development models, defined as those focused on people's needs, abilities and expectations, implying the inclusion of an ethical dimension of the development process that can not be achieved in the absence of significant community participation (Bosworth et al., 2016).

However, in practice, this way to proceed and act is limited by the top-down rules and norms, giving place in the proposals detected in LDSs an enormous similarity, without almost concrete projects adapted to particular problematics and potentialities. Even so, municipalities facing ageing and rural exodus problems use the LEADER approach as one of the main instruments, having its particular specificities as the framework to improve their situations.

The region of Andalusia, in the south of Spain, has a high number of municipalities with severe problems of depopulation. This phenomenon, in the last twenty years, has not stopped. But, how are facing these difficulties the practices of neo-endogenous rural development?. What kinds of solutions and alternatives to reduce the depopulation are coming from the Local Action Groups (LAGs)?. In our research, firstly, it has been detected the municipalities with more decreasing number of inhabitants between 2000 and 2020. Moreover, secondly, the Local Development Strategies (LDSs) for the period 2015–2020 have been reviewed, searching what types of objectives, measures and projects were proposed.

It is necessary to analyze how LAGs is tackling these, their particular problematics of ageing and loss of population, and what kind of proposals in this sense are emerging. The main research questions are: how the LEADER approach and the actors (LAGs) consider the problems and causes of rural depopulation? What kind of proposals establish?. Thus, the main objectives of the research are the analysis of the proposals of rural development practices in rural areas more affected by depopulation in the Andalusian region, and the importance given to face this phenomenon. According to this, our central hypothesis is: on the one hand, the insufficient attention to face rural depopulation problems; and, additionally that “top-down rules and generic approach of the practice of neo-endogenous rural development, are limiting the attention needed by the depopulation phenomenon and the areas where these problematics are extremely worrying.

This issue, finally, is showing, an enormous inadaptation of these plans to face the real problems of depopulation. Also, the low commitment and leadership of local actors to reduce the issues of depopulation. And finally, the minimum interest, as well, from the national and regional governments for the problems of marginal rural areas, which are suffered by sparsely populated rural areas.

2. Theoretical background

The literature review on the implementation of the LEADER approach to face the problems of sparsely populated rural areas reveals several common points. It provides several suggestions and indications to consider in the practice of neo-endogenous rural development. In the first place, the lack of concrete policies, measures, and actions to face rural depopulation problems. Through the European Union (EU), it is obvious the almost null presence of concrete policies and measures about sparsely populated areas to deal with their specific demographic, social and geographical problematics and needs (Pinilla and Sáez, 2017; Langreo and García, 2019; Sánchez-Zamora, 2014). This lack of attention is linked too to the use of the terms “disparity” and “diversity” as synonyms (Saraceno, 2013), being and showing different circumstances. Disparity points to territorial socio-economic equalities in the rural areas weakly faced by rural development policies. This lack of concrete measures and projects to face these problems will be proved, as well, below, for the LAGs analysed.

In the specific case of neo-endogenous practices, and concretely inside of the LEADER approach, it has not existed concrete measures for sparsely populated areas. Created in 1991 and designed for rural areas, the LEADER approach “did not offer an operational definition of rural areas. With its participatory approach, the existing differences between rural areas were automatically accounted for through tailored actions” (Saraceno, 2013, p. 342). The discourse of neo-endogenous practice eludes community with the territory as an unproblematic and homogeneous “community of place”. However, it has long been established that the “community of place are far from homogeneous and include many “communities of interest” with highly unequal capacities to act” (Shucksmith, 2000, p. 208). Thus, in some way, the particular specificities of the LEADER approach (bottom-up approach, innovation, creation of local public-private partnerships, participation in local decision making, interterritorial cooperation, multisectoral integration, networking and area-based approach) (European Commission, 2006), do not fit with the weaknesses and special problematics of sparsely populated rural areas: the exodus of young people, ageing, economic marginality, lack of public and private services, geographical distance to the regional and national socio-economic and political centers, and digital gap. An example, social innovation and community participation in decision making hardly can be implemented in these kinds of rural areas where the few young and female inhabitants living on these are thinking in the migration; looking for a better lifestyle or job, or where a high number of people are retired or thinking on it. It can not be forgotten, as well, that the LEADER approach has been considered as a minor tool to solve the problems of rural areas. It is a “minor instrument, with little impact on the principal areas of rural policy intervention” (Saraceno, 2013, p. 343). The diffusion of innovation in the deep rural areas is also influenced and determined by the demographic change (Lacquement, 2016). If in the upper institutions of the EU, objectives and aims for these rural areas do not exist, it will be complicated that proposals which come from the local communities fit inside these ways of planning and politic. So, the vagueness of the references to these kinds of problems inside of the LDSs and their extrapolations in concrete projects and actions.

Besides, the scarcity of economic funds and the extremely adverse conditions of their starting situation in these deep rural LAGs (exodus of young people, ageing, socio-economic marginality, ...) reduce the achievement of crucial objectives such as removing emigration, increasing economic activities. This is proven by Nieto and Cardenas (2015) in the case of rural areas of the region of Extremadura (Spain). The ageing phenomenon is one of the most severe obstacles to promote development. “The social and population decapitalisation that increasingly moves these spaces away from their recovery and greatly hinders the application and effectiveness of rural development policies” (Leco et al., 2017, p. 97). Additionally, the “loss of

specific groups, for instance, the young people, highly educated or economically active. This problem puts under stress not only economic prosperity but also potentially the reservoir of social and cultural capital, which, in turn, and on the longer term, may be expected to undermine the community's capacity to act and regenerate" (Bock, 2016, p. 557).

Similarly, procedures to obtain a grant have a high bureaucratic component, decreasing the opportunities of the inhabitants of these areas to obtain funds. This difficulty is increased by the low level of economic solvency and greater risk when generating their businesses and linked to the low number of potential consumers in these territories (Navarro et al., 2018b; Cañete et al., 2018); and driving in a high number of failed projects. These areas are perceived as places without a solution, as abandoned territories, places where the projects will fail, places where it is impossible to generate economic and social alternatives. In this philosophy, rural development practice could even promote further spatial inequalities.

But also, the personal, political and collective interests of relevant actors, local elites and politicians; produce, in these sparsely populated rural areas, the use of LEADER investments as clientelistic and power instrument (Furmankiewicz & Macken-Walsh, 2016; Pawlowska, 2017), leaving aside other relevant problematics. Also, it is considered that in most of these kinds of rural areas, local councils are the only entities to carry out development projects. Thus, this mechanism works as a "local logic of appropriateness". The local councils and local authorities have unanimous control, the supremacy (Furmankiewicz & Macken-Walsh, 2016), controlling decision-making. The private sector is irrelevant in these local contexts. "Although one of the conditions for establishing a LAG is that public administration members must constitute less than 50%, it is often mayors who plan an essential part" (Pawlowska, 2017). However, this higher participation of the public sector is not transduced on a better social distribution of funds, engaging local people, and a better selection of the projects to carry out.

Even so, the practice of the LEADER approach has generated a high number of contributions and acceptable practices to face the problems of these sparsely populated rural areas, but in a significantly reduced number, and without generating effective rural development for these territories. Of course, and in the first place, new development philosophy and a new way to understand these rural areas as places of opportunities (Copus, 2020; Sánchez et al., 2014; Alario & Baraja, 2006). The only presence of LAGs "promoting resilience and enabling these communities to overcome the challenges being faced, (...), because of their ability to overcome social break-up and the lack of involvement amongst the local population in the policies that affect them" (Martínez et al., 2015, p. 44). Also, in the "promotion of local and territorial identity" (Buller, 2002, p. 192). Despite the difficulty to foster social innovation in these places affected by ageing and depopulation, the LEADER approach has worked on it, having excellent but insufficient results on this aim. Similar circumstances are observed in social innovation, valorisation of territorial capital and use of extra-local capital, obtaining in sparsely populated rural areas engaging experiences of development projects and development practices; creating with these initiatives, new identities in these territories (Belliggiano et al., 2018). Also, actions directed to foster economic diversification; rural tourism (Tirado & Hernández, 2019; Maroto & Pinos, 2020; Maroto et al., 2020); environmental protection; the proximity of public and private services; promotion of small and medium enterprises; delivering services, mobility and logistic issues (ENRD, 2018a); the improvement of infrastructures; the promotion of high-speed internet and online services (ENRD, 2019a); youth and generational renewal (ENRD, 2018b); social inclusion and settlement of migrants (ENRD, 2019); reduction and simplification of bureaucratic procedures (ENRD, 2019b) among other topics; have obtained successful experiences in a large number of sparsely populated rural areas (Nieto & Cárdenas, 2018; Labianca & Navarro, 2019), "to retain the existing populations or encourage people to move from urban centres into otherwise declining rural zones" (Buller, 2002, p. 193).

The above circumstances (the inexistence of concrete measures for sparsely populated areas; the predominance of top-down rules; the scarcity of economic funds; the extremely adverse conditions of their starting situation; the control of local elites of decision-making in rural development; and only a few numbers of successful projects in social innovation); have as a consequence the poor results of the practice of neo-endogenous rural development. With a small business base, as it has been pointed out by several authors (Bock, 2016; Leco et al.,

2017; Nieto and Cárdenas, 2015 and 2018; Navarro et al., 2018a; among others. “The effects of rural development have been uneven, and differences between well-to-do and marginal rural areas have been increasing both across and within countries” (Bock, 2016, p.552). These circumstances are reflected and proved in the next paragraphs, giving; as a result, almost null attention to the problems producing depopulation.

3. Methodology and study area

As other authors have shown, there is an extreme complexity to establish a typology of rural areas (Esparcia et al., 2017; Fadic et al., 2019; Molinero, 2019; Cos & Reques, 2019; Reig et al., 2016). Most of them use population density criteria (Molinero, 2019). In the Andalusian case, the application of this variable could be problematic because of the higher presence of inhabitants in rural areas. In general, in this region, rural areas do not suffer the problem of the sparse population in the same way than in other European rural areas. This minor problem of depopulation does not mean that we do not find municipalities with a low number of inhabitants: less than ten inhabitants/km² and even less than five inhab./km². But in a minimum quantity (15.3% in the first case and 4.3% in the second one). It could be said that in Andalusia, the more worrying situations are, the more the decline of inhabitants in a high number of municipalities (55.7%). Even this decrease is extreme in many of them. Obviously, the higher decreasing of inhabitants are extremely connected to rural areas with sparsely populated areas.

For it, in our region, the selection of the study area has been realized having it as the main indicator for the decline of the population; concretely, to the LAGs areas including municipalities with a population decrease of -29% between the years 2000 and 2019. In this study, the demographic feature of depopulation has been highlighted above the geographic component. The first stage has been the detection of the municipalities with a more decreasing population between the years 2000 and 2019. This first phase has been developed through a simple cluster analysis of the growth or decline of inhabitants in the 769 Andalusian municipalities. Five groupings and typologies of rural areas, inside all the Andalusian LAGs areas, have been detected: extreme depopulation, high depopulation, moderate depopulation, soft population increase and high population increase. The study area has been concreted to the first municipalities, those suffering an extreme depopulation (as it was noted above, -29% between 2000–2019).

Also, a set of geographic, demographic and socioeconomic variables have been added, looking for the characterization of these municipalities. Apart from the growth/decline of inhabitants, the selected variables have been: the number of municipalities, surface, total population, density, altitude, masculinity indexes (total and between 15 and 64 years), average of municipal inhabitants, ageing ratio, average age, average of net incomes per inhabitants, and employees inside the agricultural sector. The data are from the last year for which information is available, 2019. Most of these variables show medium correlations with the population growth/decline variable (2000–2019), both in positive and negative values, and positioned between the ranges 0.42 and -0.11: municipal population (0.42), net incomes (0.41), density (0.25), medium age (-0.35), ageing index (-0.34), altitude (-0.31), affiliated to the agricultural sector (-0.31), masculinity index from 15 to 64 years (-0.21), and total masculinity index (-0.11) (Table 1).

The selected municipalities (70 in total) have been those belonging to cluster 1, called “extreme depopulation areas” (see Table 1 and Figure 1). These territories present the more worrying and extreme situation, with a decline of inhabitants of -30%, grouping to 70 municipalities, and a surface of 6,013 km² (7% of the Andalusian region). They are located, predominantly in isolated, mountain and peripheral areas, far from the main transport infrastructures, and the main centres of political and economic decision-making of the scales national, regional, provincial and even county. They are located, predominantly, in the Eastern provinces: Granada (30), Almería (12), and Jaén (7); and to a lesser extent, in the Western provinces: Seville (3), Huelva (6), or Córdoba (6), not finding villages of this type in the province of Cádiz. The values of its variables present very severe and extreme situations: a limited number of inhabitants (58,108 inhabitants), very low densities (10 inhabitants/km²), high ageing (28.7%), extreme masculinization index of the adult population (between 15–65 years old, 115 men versus

100 females), high average age (51 years); having as well negative vegetative and migratory population growths (Larrubia et al., 2020). Other features are also distinctive to this type of deep rural areas: high importance of the agricultural sector in the labour market; low incomes of their inhabitants; even, atomization and dispersion of its settlements. It is the most “authentic” rural, but at the same time, the most “idealized” (Woods, 2011), when, as can be searched, it is the one with the most alarming situation. In these municipalities, greater protagonism should be directed to policies that face emptying.

Tab 1. Geographic, demographic and socioeconomic indicators according to territorial typologies for Andalusian region (2019). Source: Instituto de Estadística de Andalucía. The authors

Indicators/Typologies	Extreme de-population	High de-population	Low de-population	Soft popu-lation increase	High popu-lation increase	Total
Number of municipalities	70	164	190	135	144	703
Surface (km ²)	6,012.6	17,848.0	23,168.3	17,344.6	14,546.3	78,918.8
Population (inhabitants)	58,108	285,509	756,421	1,105,540	1,791,977	3,997,555
Density (inhab./km ²)	10	16	33	64	123	51
Altitude (meters)	751	683	559	444	293	531
Masculinity index (total)	105	101	100	99	100	100
Masculinity index (15–64 years old)	115	110	107	104	103	104
Population/municipality (inhabitants)	830	1,741	3,981	8,189	12,444	5,686
Population growth 2000–2019 %	-29.6	-16.2	-4.4	+6.3	+34.8	+11.6
Aging index (+65 years old) %	28.7	24.1	19.8	17.4	15.1	17.5
Medium age	51	48	45	44	42	45
Net incomes per inhabitant (euros)	8,947.9	9,875.0	10,322.3	11,570.3	13,360.7	10,944
Affiliated people to the agricultural sector %	47.1	42.2	39.2	27.9	20.1	28.1

These municipalities are placed in 26 LAGs of the region, which has a total of 52 LAGs (49.1%). In a second stage, 13 LAGs have been selected according to the number of municipalities inside of “extreme depopulation”. Thus, in those with three or more municipalities, the LDSs has been analyzed (Table 2). The analysis placed the more extreme circumstances in the LAGs of Guadix (ten municipalities in “extreme depopulation” -31%, having an inhabitant decrease closed to -30%), Montes (40% of villages, and 23% of inhabitants), and Altiplano de Granada (5,257 inhabitants).

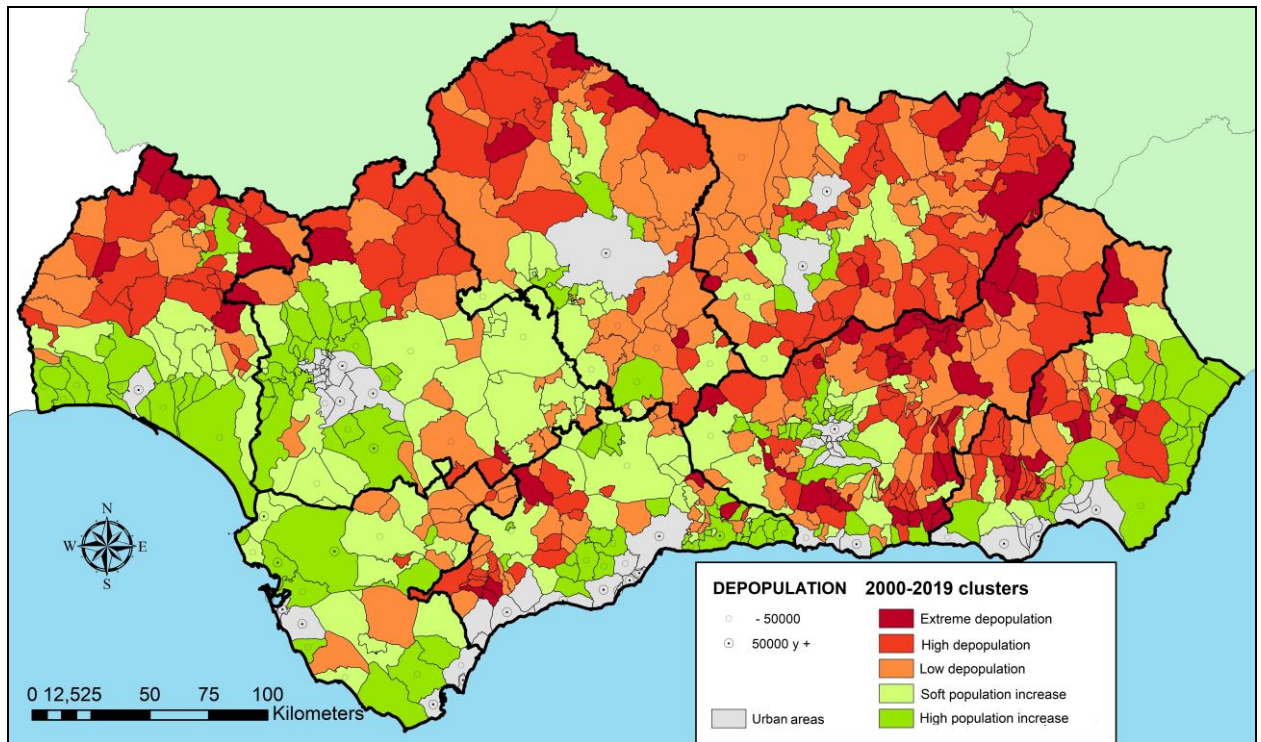


Fig 1. Clusters of rural areas according to the population growth in the municipalities of Andalusia for the period 2000–2019. Source: Instituto de Estadística y Cartografía de Andalucía. The authors

Tab 2. LAGs selected according to municipalities and inhabitants in “extreme depopulation” for the Andalusian region (2019). Source: Instituto de Estadística de Andalucía. The authors

Number	LAGs	Number of municipalities inside “extreme depopulation” cluster		Inhabitants inside “extreme depopulation” cluster	
		Total	%	Total	%
1	Guadix	10	31.3	5,112	11.5
2	Alpujarra-Sierra Nevada de Granada	6	18.8	3,807	9.7
3	Alpujarra-Sierra Nevada de Almería	4	12.5	2,648	6.5
4	Filabres-Alhamilla	4	23.5	575	3.5
5	Pedroches	4	23.5	3,324	6.3
6	Montes	4	40.0	4,489	23.2
7	Valle Lecrín-Temple-Costa Interior	4	18.2	2,886	2.7
8	Sierra de Aracena y Picos de Aroche	4	13.8	2,819	7.4
9	Almanzora	3	11.5	1,066	2.0
10	Altiplano de Granada	3	21.4	5,257	9.9
11	Poniente Granadino	3	18.8	3,923	5.4
12	Sierra de Segura	3	25.0	4,148	17.7
13	Serranía de Ronda	3	12.5	1,393	1.0

For these 13 LAGs, the document of LDs for the period 2015–2020 have been reviewed, searching for two key points. Firstly, how depopulation phenomenon has been treated inside of these plans, and after that, the number of repetitions of several keywords related with this problem has been considered: “depopulation” (“despoblación”, in the Spanish language, and understood as demographic decline, as “rural depopulation”); “depopulation” (in this case, “despoblamiento”, in the Spanish language understood as geographical decline of inhabitants, as “depopulation in peripheral areas”); “ageing”; and also, “population fixation or settlement”. This last point, to find out if in the LDSs were proposed alternatives to face depopulation. Additionally, it was taken into account, the concrete paragraph where each of these keywords has been referenced, differentiating: diagnosis and SWOT analysis, and proposals (Objectives, and Action plan). Thus, the keywords noted were considered in all the selected LDSs and in all their parts; it can be seen in Table 3.

Secondly, for these documents of proposals, Objectives and Action Plan paragraphs, have been noted for those objectives and projects related to facing the depopulation. Also, all

the notes and mentions related to this issue have been detailed. Definitively, to extract what types of strategies for these kinds of territories have been proposed.

4. Results

4.1 How has the problematics of rural depopulation in LDSs been treated by the LAGs?

The number of repetitions of these keywords linked to depopulation has been searched: “depopulation” (“despoblación”, in the Spanish language understood as “rural demographic decline”); “depopulation” (in this case, “despoblamiento”, in the Spanish language understood as geographical decline of inhabitants, as “depopulation in peripheral rural areas”); “ageing”; and also, “population fixation or settlement”. Also, it was taken into account, the concrete document of the LDSs where each of these keywords has been referenced, and differentiating: diagnosis and SWOT analysis, on one side; and proposals (Objectives, and Action plan), on the other side (Table 3). Firstly, it is essential to show the high importance dedicated to depopulation issues in LDSs of these studied LAGs. This question is proven in the high number of mentions of the keywords inside of each LDSs. Thus, with an average of 51 mentions for “ageing”, 14 for “depopulation” (“despoblamiento”, a geographic decline of inhabitants); 8 for “population fixation or settlement”; and finally, 6 for “depopulation” (“despoblación”, demographic decline).

The predominance of the word “ageing”, with an average of 51 mentions inside of these LDSs, and, about all, inside of the diagnosis and swot analysis paragraphs (94%, 48 mentions).

In second place, “depopulation”, understood as “geographic decline of inhabitants”, and “depopulation” understood as “demographic decline”. Maybe it was an inevitable confusion in both concepts, using both words, “despoblamiento” and “despoblación”, with a similar significance, when they have not.

Extreme gap observed between diagnosis and SWOT analysis, on one side, and proposals paragraphs, on the other side. Thus, in the first ones, words related to this issue are mentioned in a high number, more than 50% in almost all of them, being extreme in the case of ageing (94%), and also for depopulation in its two “Spanish” meanings and words: geographical, 81%, and demographic, 57%. And, an exception for “population fixation or settlement” concepts (41%), being logic this last one aspect because of more attention given to alternatives and solutions to face this problematic. As it will be pointed later, on one side, in the diagnosis and SWOT analysis, local inhabitants had more protagonism, showing their huge knowledge of the territory. Also, in SWOT analysis, the problems related to depopulation, such as rural exodus, ageing or marginality, have been treated superficially, without a deep analysis of their main and initial causes.

On the other side, in the proposals, rules and generic lines came from top-down directions, reducing the opportunity to focus on rural depopulation's problematic. Even this part of the task, the preparation of the proposals, was developed mainly by the technicians of the LAGs, and the external workers, without null or almost null involvement of local inhabitants, just only the local elites who live outside of these depopulated municipalities. This consequence was proven before by Navarro et al. (2016), Nieto & Cardenas (2015) or Saraceno (2013).

Finally, reduced or even null attention has been given to alternatives linked to population fixation or settlement. The concepts “population fixation or settlement”, are just mentioned in an average of 8 times in each LDS, showing almost null interest given to proposals and alternatives to face rural depopulation.

Tab 3. Keywords related to depopulation mentioned in LDSs for LAGs with a high number of municipalities in “extreme number of inhabitants decreasing” in the Andalusian region for the period 2015–2020. Source: LAGs, LDSs. The authors

LAGs	SWOT analysis and diagnosis Total	Words			
		Depopulation (understood as demographic decline, “despoblación”)	Depopulation (understood as geographical decline of inhabitants, “despoblamiento”)	Ageing	Population fixation or settlement
Guadix	Diagnosis and SWOT analysis	9	13	65	9
	Total	10	13	65	10
Alpujarra-Sª Nevada Granada	Diagnosis and SWOT analysis	7	3	36	4
	Total	9	4	39	4
Sª Aracena y Picos de Aroche	Diagnosis and SWOT analysis	1	0	8	0
	Total	2	0	10	0
Valle de Lecrín-Temple-Costa Interior	Diagnosis and SWOT analysis	7	3	48	1
	Total	7	7	52	2
Montes	Diagnosis and SWOT analysis	--	--	--	--
	Total	--	--	--	--
Alpujarra-Sª Nevada Almeriense	Diagnosis and SWOT analysis	3	16	80	3
	Total	22	26	80	16
Filabres-Alhamilla	Diagnosis and SWOT analysis	4	17	77	3
	Total	6	21	77	29
Pedroches	Diagnosis and SWOT analysis	0	17	61	5
	Total	4	22	61	5
Poniente Granadino	Diagnosis and SWOT analysis	5	10	43	0
	Total	7	10	43	0
Levante Almeriense y Almazora	Diagnosis and SWOT analysis	0	4	12	0
	Total	0	5	15	0
Sierra de Segura	Diagnosis and SWOT analysis	0	15	70	4
	Total	0	15	72	15
Serranía de Ronda	Diagnosis and SWOT analysis	4	31	53	0
	Total	4	34	55	0
Altiplano de Granada	Diagnosis and SWOT analysis	2	10	23	10
	Total	3	15	46	14
Total	Diagnosis and SWOT analysis	42	139	576	39
	Total	74	172	615	95
	% Diagnosis and SWOT analysis according to total	56,8	80,8	93,7	41,1
	Average Diagnosis and SWOT analysis	3,5	11,6	48,0	3,3
	Average Total	6,2	14,3	51,3	7,9

4.2 Proposals suggested tackling the problems related to the depopulation phenomenon in LDSs

For Objectives and Action Plan paragraphs, they have pointed out and studied those objectives and projects related to reducing the problems linked to depopulation: provision of basic and proximity services, improvement of quality of life, fixation of young and female inhabitants, attract people and talent, new jobs for women and youth, Also, all the notes and mentions related to this point have been considered. Definitively, to show the strategies to face the decrease in the number of inhabitants in these LAGs. In the first place, the lack of concrete objectives, measures and projects to face depopulation in LDSs. Thus, these LAGs, just on a few occasions, mention directly or indirectly (fixation of the young people, incorporation of young farmers, teaching levels and young people, proximity services, etc.) this challenging problem of depopulation (see Table 4). Even for some LAGs, the objectives and action plans do not directly mention this problem: Valle de Lecrín-Temple-Costa Interior, Pedroches, Levante y Almazora. Rules which come from upper institutions, such as the regional government, limit this greater attention to local and sparsely populated areas. Similar studies pointed it out in this way, too (Cañete et al., 2018).

Tab 4. Objectives, projects and topics detected in LDSs for LAGs with a high number of municipalities in “extreme inhabitants decreasing” in the Andalusian region for the period 2015–2020. Source: LAGs, LDSs. The authors

LAGs	Topics which are related with depopulation	Objectives	Projects	Others
Guadix	Essential services, Training, Entrepreneurship, Young people and women, Settlement of the population	--	2	1 Need
Alpujarra-S ^a Nevada Granada	Incorporation of young farmers, Conservation and protection of rural heritage, Teaching levels and young people	--	2	1 Threat
S ^a Aracena y Picos de Aroche	Participation in decision making, improve quality of life, youth	1	1 Coop. Project	1 Weakness
Lecrín-Temple- Costa	Fixation of the young population	--	--	1 Need
Montes	Infrastructures, essential services, public spaces	--	1	0
Alpujarra-S ^a Nevada Almeriense	Proximity and essential services, depopulation of rural areas, reinforcing in women and young people the local identity and feeling of permanence, infrastructures, quality of life, fixing the population	1	3	1 Need
Filabres- Alhamilla	Essential services, employment, self-employment, women, young population, training, territorial identity, cultural and sports infrastructures, visibility of women in economy, depopulation, training, settlement, quality of life, agricultural and livestock farms, risk of depopulation	4	6 1 Coop. project	1 Diagnosis 1 Project selection criteria
Pedroches	Risk of depopulation	--	--	1 Project selection criteria
Poniente Granadino	Services	--	3	1 Need
Levante y Almanzora	Null mentions.	--	--	--
Sierra de Segura	Training, entrepreneurship, women, young people, employment, quality of life, participation in decision making, risk of depopulation and ageing, fixation of the population	2	1	3 2 Needs 1 Project selection criteria
Serranía de Ronda	Proximity services, geographic asymmetry, small municipalities, quality of life, classification of municipalities according to depopulation criteria	2	1	1 Diagnosis
Altiplano de Granada	Attract talent, improve human, social and business capital, entrepreneurship, entrepreneurial skills, settle of young people and women, ageing, the return of women, young people and couples, quality of life, infrastructures, services, depopulation, ageing, new population, residential tourism, the attraction of the rural environment	1	1	3 Needs 1 Potentiality 1 Project selection criteria

Secondly, mainly generic and simple proposals have been found, without the consideration of local specificities of each LAG territory, and without a strong consistency. “Depopulation”, “support for the fixation of the population to the territory”; “fixation of the young population in the territory”; “depopulation of rural areas” were some of the generic intentions. Even objectives and projects are repetitive, very similar, among LAGs. Some common topics were: essential and proximity services, youth and women, training, quality of life, employment, entrepreneurial skills, improvement of territorial identity, and participation in decision-making (see Figure 2). Previous research mentioned before pointed to these consequences, too (Saraceno, 2013).

In third place, it is obvious the secondary, and accessory role played by these objectives and projects inside of the LDSs, i.e. cooperation projects. Even, the need to face the depopulation issue was relegated to a second line.

And finally, it could note only a few interesting, innovative, and demonstrative contributions in the analyzed LDSs made by the LAGs. For example, in the case of the LAG of Altiplano de Granada, attractive and creative proposals could be noted: the attraction of human capital (“Talent”); the improvement of human, social and business capital; the promotion of entrepreneurship and entrepreneurial skills; the settlement and even return of women, young people and couples; and the attraction of rural environment. In the LAGs of Sierra de Aracena y Picos de Aroche and Sierra de Segura, the involvement of local inhabitants, especially, young people and women, in local decision making is essential to face depopulation. Moreover, in some of the studied LAGs, projects selection criteria, and risk of depopulation and ageing, in diagnosis paragraphs, were considered in their LDSs. These successful proposals follow the experiences reflected in the database of the European Network of Rural Development (ENRD, 2018a, 2018b, 2019a, 2019b).



Fig 2. Word cloud of topics related to face rural depopulation detected in LDSs for Andalusian LAGs analyzed for the period 2000–2019. Source: LAGs, LDSs. The authors

5. Discussion and conclusions

The inadaptation of these plans (LDSs) to solve this sparsely populated rural areas' real problems proves the horizontal and top-down vision of this practice, without understanding that these territories are very different. They are reflecting as well the need to adapt objectives, measures and actions to the concrete problematics of these and the ethical dimension of the neo-endogenous rural development theories. Ruralist experts pointed in this sense before: Bock 2016; Bosworth et al. 2016; or Molinero, 2019.

As Navarro et al. (2016) pointed out, the predominance of the top-down approach in the planning and management of rural development, in rules and bureaucracy, has limited the attention given to rural depopulation. In fact, it has played a negative point in adapting the LDSs to the local specificities and problematics of these sparsely and depopulated rural areas. Previous studies of Pinilla and Sáez (2017), Landreo and Garcia (2019) and Sánchez-Zamora (2014) noted this lack of attention to the local problems and initiatives. While inside the LDSs analyzed, in Diagnosis and SWOT analysis paragraphs, the importance shown to this problem was high; in Objectives and Action plans documents, this topic's relevance was almost null. If in the diagnosis and SWOT analysis, local inhabitants had more protagonism; for objectives and action lines, rules and decisions of EU, national and regional government, were prioritized. In fact, for all these, LDSs applied two new versions by the regional government, three in total, removing in the last ones some particular proposals and projects adapted to local problematics and potentialities, and putting the focus in some topics and horizontal objectives which came from the EU scale: combat the climatic change, environmental issues, youth and gender. As it was studied before, LEADER was appropriated by local political elites and external institutions (Furmankiewicz & Macken-Walsh, 2016).

Thus, it is relevant to note as well, the reduced presence of concrete objectives, measures and projects to combat depopulation in these deep rural areas. Most of them were too generic, without a firm consistency proving the almost null attention to tackle the problems of sparsely populated rural areas, as it has been said before by Pinilla and Sáez (2017) or Sánchez-Zamora (2014). In those focused on this issue, its importance was secondary, accessory, circumstance influenced by the lack of proposals inside EU policies, to face the particular problematics of sparsely populated rural areas; shown as well in previous studies (Bock, 2016; or Saraceno, 2019). The practice of neo-endogenous rural development is probably being carried out homogeneously, considering in a limited way concrete territorial opportunities to use and specific problematics to face. However, it can not be forgotten, that in some LAGs, some pointed alternatives were extremely interesting and innovators: attract talent, improve the local skills in entrepreneurship, foster the local identity, participation in local decision making, etc. Nevertheless, it is necessary to work and deepen much more. These LDSs could be improved, trying to satisfy the five key SMART components, which must have a development plan: specific, measurable, attainable, relevant and time-based.

Some features of the LEADER approach must be used in a higher way: youth and generational renewal, settlement of migrants and new inhabitants, attract talent and improve human capital, the participation of local inhabitants in decision making, social and territorial innovations, new local identities, environmental protection, proximity services, SMEs, mobility and logistic issues, promotion of high-speed internet and online services, simplification of bureaucratic procedures; as it is shown in the successful cases of the ENRD (2018a; 2018b; 2019^a; 2019b).

Also, depopulation, understood as the “demographic decline of rural areas”, has the same importance as the geographical phenomenon of “sparsely populated rural areas” of a low density of inhabitants. It could be said that it is the beginning of this problem.

On the one hand, according to the previous analysis of their LDSs, it has been observed that the municipalities with extreme depopulation have been left aside. Without proposals to combat young and female people's exodus and improve and promote essential and proximity services. No solution places without potential assets and projects. Definitely, as empty areas to promote rural development, and where depopulation effects are just taken into consideration in a minor and secondary way. On the other hand, and also, previous research pointed to this scarcity of projects in these areas (Cañete et al., 2028; Nieto & Cárdenas, 2015).

In the next research about this topic, it is necessary to focus on who were the main stakeholders involved in the elaboration of the LDSs. Can any differences be found between LAGs in the three key collectives' participation: entrepreneurs, local politicians, and civic associations? Moreover, even correspondence between promoters and beneficiaries of grants comes from the LEADER approach and participants in LDSs, differentiating between typologies of rural areas.

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