



This project is funded by the EU via the Structural Reform Support Programme and implemented by the OECD, in collaboration with the European Commission



Kick-off event on the project *Strategic Governance Plan for Rural Depopulation in Asturias, Cantabria, Castilla y León and Galicia (RESOE)*

Summary record

2 December 2020

Setting the context

The kick-off event of the OECD project *Strategic Governance Plan for Rural Depopulation in Asturias, Cantabria, Castilla y León and Galicia (RESOE)*, funded by the EU via the Structural Reform Support Programme and implemented by the Centre for Entrepreneurship, SMEs, Regions and Cities (CFE) of the OECD, in collaboration with the European Commission, took place on Wednesday 2 December. It was attended by over 200 representatives from local and national governments, rural organisations, and from the European Commission.

The RESOE regions face population decline and ageing and have a high degree of rurality. The next stage of the project involves conducting study missions in each region to bring together policy-makers from RESOE and OECD experts, gathering data and exchanging experiences of best practices in managing depopulation in rural areas. The project will then design an action plan for each of the four Spanish regions and a common strategy to address the challenge of rural depopulation.

The event was well received in social media with a wide number of posts, including posts from [Dubravka Šuica](#), Vice-President of the European Commission for Democracy and Demography, and from [Elisa Ferreira](#), Commissioner for Cohesion and Reforms, and was also the subject of a [press release by the European Commission](#).

Part 1: High-level session on strategies for depopulation

The kick-off, moderated by Alain Dupeyras, Head of Regional Development and Tourism Division of CFE at the OECD, opened with welcome remarks from Pablo Zuloaga, Vice-President of the Government of Cantabria, the region coordinating the four Spanish regions involved in the project. He briefly presented the project and its objectives, and stressed that this project is a unique opportunity due to its timing, its multi-regional structure and its holistic approach.

His intervention was followed by a pre-recorded speech by Dubravka Šuica, Vice-President of the European Commission for Democracy and Demography, who stressed the importance of connectivity and digitalisation in rural areas in the framework of the European Commission's long-term vision of rural development.

The event followed with a plenary session on how can policies help regions experiencing depopulation.

- Mario Nava, Director of the European Commission Directorate General Structural Reform Support (DG REFORM) insisted on the importance of reforms to improve the well-being of rural inhabitants and referred to the NextGenerationEU recovery plan. He also stressed that reforms

are both a necessity and an opportunity for rural regions to perform better. The goal will be to maintain and improve the quality of life by providing them with tools and tailor-made solutions, taking into account local strengths and weaknesses.

- Francesc Boya, Secretary General for the Demographic Challenge in the Spanish Ministry for the Ecological Transition and the Demographic Challenge, indicated that the project's axes align with those of the National Strategy for the Demographic Challenge in Spain. He stressed that the main objective of his Ministry is to seek consensus among all Autonomous Communities in Spain in order to strengthen public policies in the field of demography and territorial cohesion.
- Nadim Ahmad, Deputy Director at CFE at OECD, emphasised that depopulation, although increasingly important, is not new and that in order to tackle it, it is necessary to understand that shared challenges require common responses and target solutions. In his speech, he recalled other opportunities from the current COVID-19 pandemic, including growth of eco-tourism, increased awareness on responsible supply chains and business conducts, and the higher awareness among consumers of local products.

To close this plenary session, the Spanish regions of the project intervened briefly to give some remarks.

- Francisco Igea, Vice-President of the Government of Castilla y León, pointed out that the Brexit voting map, a reflection of the disaffection of the rural world with regard to the European project, represents a serious warning, and that it was essential for connectivity to be measured by territory and not by population.
- Fabiola Garcia, Councilor for Social Policy in the Government of Galicia, focused on the importance of taking up educational incentives aimed at retaining families in rural areas, including the universalization of infant education from 0 to 3 years old.
- Jaime Izquierdo, Commissioner for Demographic Challenge in the Government of Asturias, reasoned that the communities affected by ageing will have to face higher socio-health costs in the future and the increase in the cost of services due to territorial dispersion. He also stressed the need of changing the Spanish industrial, territorial and administrative model.

Part 2: Parallel thematic sessions

The kick-off meeting provided an opportunity for local actors and experts from the four regions to exchange views on their strategies to face the demographic challenge. After the first plenary session, four closed parallel thematic sessions took place to discuss the project topics.

- *Session 1: Quality service provision for rural communities* was moderated by Valentina Corsetti, from the Directorate-General for Regional and Urban Policy (DG REGIO) at the European Commission, and included a presentation by Ana I. Moreno Monroy from CFE at the OECD. The moderator stressed that the costs of public services in rural areas are higher due to transport costs and low economies of scale. This brings the need to adapt services to the specificities of rural areas, reduce the digital divide, develop digital skills, design tax incentives, increase female participation, and provide evaluate externally the implementation of public policies. The moderator concluded by stressing that policies need to take into account territorial and dispersion criteria, and not only economic and efficiency criteria, when distributing financial resources at the regional level¹.
- *Session 2: Digitalisation to boost rural development* was moderated by Raffaele Trapasso, from CFE at the OECD and included a presentation from Isidro Laso from the Cabinet of Commissioner Gabriel for Innovation, Research, Education, Culture and Youth in the European

¹ Due to technical problems, the regions were unable to comment on this session.

Commission. This session highlighted the importance of improving the penetration of digital technology in rural areas and of reinforcing the role of rural areas in anticipating digital challenges. In commenting on the session, Ángel Cabal Cifuentes, Director of the Asturian Consortium of Technological Services noted that both digital services and users create a virtuous circle, where user satisfaction favours the demand for better telecommunications and better services.

- *Session 3: Governance, strategies and implementation for rural development* was moderated by Isidora Zapata from CFE at the OECD, and included a presentation by Nuno Oliveira Romão from the Agency for Development and Cohesion in Portugal. The session highlighted three main challenges of governance: 1) the predominance of a top-down vision decoupled from the specificities of the rural world; 2) the gap between funding or fiscal incentives and local needs; and 3) the existence of overlapping responsibilities across levels of government. Luis Dominguez Castro, Professor at the University of Vigo (Galicia), stressed the importance of rural political cultures, as they remain fundamental for the survival in the present and future digital society. He also highlighted the importance of co-responsibility of the rural world in decision-making in order to leave behind the victimhood that characterizes it.
- *Session 4: Social entrepreneurship and innovation in rural places* was moderated by Yancy Vaillant, from the Toulouse Business School in France, and included a presentation by Gorka Espiau from the Agirre Lehendakaria Center for Social and Political Studies in Spain. The session defined social entrepreneurship as the core of an entrepreneurial society that knows how to take initiatives and has leadership. The moderator stressed the importance of instilling confidence in the often-pessimistic view of rural areas –especially in the youth-, and of putting an end to the dichotomy between urban and rural areas. Gustavo García, Director General of Employment of the Government of Cantabria, explained that the direct connection between the rural and the urban worlds in Cantabria opens up hybrid areas of cooperation that ultimately favour rural interests.

Part 3: Closing remarks

Jose Enrique Garcilazo, Deputy Head of Regional Development and Tourism Division of CFE at the OECD, stressed that the rural-urban divide has increased since the 2008 financial crisis (according to the recent OECD report [Rural Well-being: Geography of Opportunities](#)), not only for economic reasons, but also due to cultural factors and differences in welfare. In the context of the demographic challenge, a holistic vision becomes fundamental to help reactivating the productive sector, make better use of resources, improve services, make rural areas more attractive, and improve the interaction between urban and rural areas. The remarks stressed that opportunities in rural areas require a forward-looking policy vision. Regions need to work on strategies to attract young people, to reactivate productive structures, and to adapt service provision to future challenges, and to boost digitalisation. Finally, he stressed that coordinated policies from the bottom up, common strategies, and shared actions adapted to the specificities of each place are crucial.

The last intervention, by Ignacio Molina, advisor of the Spanish Government and Ministry of Ecological Transition and the Demographic Challenge, noted that the four themes of the project are intertwined and cannot be understood without each other. He also remarked that infrastructure provision without services is pointless, hence the importance of adaptation. Finally, he stressed the importance of cooperation between different levels of government to achieve the objectives of rural communities.