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# A VISION FOR RURAL AREAS

MAP Position Paper



## LONG-TERM VISION FOR RURAL AREAS: CONTRIBUTION FROM 20 SCIENCE- SOCIETY-POLICY PLATFORMS

### MAP POSITION PAPER

INNOVATION IN RURAL DEVELOPMENT IN ARAGÓN (IDRA)

SPAIN

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## 1. Headline message

The need to obtain demographic balance has been identified as the key issue to resolve for rural Aragón in the coming 20 years. Rural areas in Aragón are some of the least densely populated areas in Europe, and they are experiencing a continuous depopulation and ageing of the population. The desire among stakeholders is for rural Aragón to be economically diverse and sustainable by 2040, leading it to be an attractive place to live for all generations, for men as well as women.

In order to increase the attractiveness of rural areas in Aragón, additional employment opportunities as well as new economic activities need to be generated. At the same time, the importance of maintaining family farming in order to sustain population in rural areas needs to be underlined. The quality of life in rural areas is generally considered high, and society's appreciation of the qualities offered by rural areas are expected to be further exacerbated by climate change impacts and the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic.

However, more needs to be done in order to enable more citizens to live in rural areas. Apart from generating additional job opportunities, it is also essential that the level of provision of basic services, such as education and health care, can be maintained, but this will be increasingly expensive as the population is ageing and decreasing. Furthermore, increasing the provision of transport services and the access to housing has been identified as a current problem where improvements would facilitate for the population to stay in, or relocate to, rural areas. Essential for the vitalisation of rural areas in Aragón is the continued digitalisation, where no area is left behind, which offers numerous opportunities for rural areas both in relation to facilitating work opportunities on a distance, and in the provision of basic services.

On a policy level, it is considered important to improve the prioritisation between policy goals as well as the coordination of the policy making process affecting rural areas. The improvement of the coordination of implementation of policies in rural areas is also an essential element. Furthermore, the active participation of rural citizens in the decision-making is considered vital but difficult to obtain.

**Keywords:** *depopulation, low population density, ageing population, provision of basic services and services for young citizens and families, digitalisation, family farming, urban-rural connection*

## 2. Key scientific evidence

Aragón is undergoing a demographic change that carries consequences on an economic, social and territorial level. Aragón is among the 50 European regions where the population decline has been greatest between 2011-2015. The decline is most pronounced in rural areas, and the share of rural population decreased by 8.9% between 2008 and 2018. 18% of the municipalities of the region are at risk of irreversible depopulation. (Informe 2018 Panorama social de Aragón). At the same time, Aragón is the second-most aged European region<sup>1</sup> (Eurostat, 2016).

In addition, the low population density in many areas lead to costly provision of basic services, including health care, education, and transports. Due to this, the service provision is by some considered poor. (Southern Sparsely Populated Areas, 2019). Many young people migrate to cities due to the perception of lack of attractiveness in rural areas, linked to remoteness, lack of activities, low mobility and connectivity and restriction of labour markets, among others (Eurostat, 2019). Also, rural areas also face a bigger challenge with increasing masculinisation, due to the out migration of women.

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<sup>1</sup> comparing the share of the population over 80 years to the total population over 64 years



In Aragón, the economies of regions with low population density tend to grow much less than in densely populated areas. In sparsely populated territories, workers often specialize in the primary sector, energy production, manufacturing and tourism services, leading to mono-economies. (Government of Aragón, 2017).

Several studies indicate that digitalisation, tourism, and the cooperation among agricultural producers, together with smart specialisation strategies, could offer new opportunities to promote the economic prosperity of large areas with limited population. Also, the opportunities offered from bioeconomy, production of renewable energy, and industry 4.0 (the internet of things, connectivity, bigdata) are often highlighted as important for Aragón. (Government of Aragón, 2017).

See the MAP discussion paper for a more complete review of the key scientific evidence related to trends, challenges and opportunities for rural areas in Aragón.

### 3. Summary of the outcomes of the delphi

Through interviews with concerned stakeholders, a comprehensive survey, and a consensus meeting with the MAP members, the most important challenges and opportunities for the coming 20 years have been identified. Furthermore, the desirable future for Aragón rural areas as well as potential enablers to achieve this vision have been identified through the same process. Nine individuals were interviewed in June 2020, representing civil society, science and regional public administration. The survey, undertaken in September 2020, had 366 respondents, representing the private sector, civil society, regional and local public administration, with a well-balanced response rate between the various groups.<sup>2</sup> The consensus meeting, organised on October 6, 2020, had 6 participants, also representing all stakeholder groups.

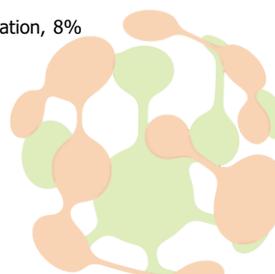
#### 3.1. Challenges and opportunities in the next 20 years

The need to obtain demographic balance in order to maintain population in rural areas was identified as the key issue to resolve in the coming 20 years. The ageing and decreasing population in rural areas in Aragón were found to be the two trends that stand out as the most relevant according to the survey participants (considered as a very important or important trend by 95% and 93% respectively). All interviewees agreed that the decreasing population, ageing population and increasing gender gap represents the major issues for rural areas in Aragón (although among the survey participants, the increasing masculinisation was considered a less relevant trend, with only 49% indicating it as important or very important).

The creation of employment opportunities and the generation of new economic activities are essential factors to resolve in rural Aragón, considered important or very important by 94% and 91% of the survey participants respectively. 84% considered the human capital loss a very important or important challenge. The interviewees also reached a general consensus that the human capital flight from rural areas represents a major challenge. In addition to the need to create new employment opportunities, some of the interviewees pointed out that the reverse problem, i.e. the lack of workforce, both qualified and unqualified, is an issue, causing difficulties for SMEs wishing to establish or maintain production in rural areas. Some also considered there to be a lack of entrepreneurship among rural citizens, linked to the human capital flight, while others considered that there was not a lack of entrepreneurship but rather a lack of support for those with an entrepreneurial mindset facilitating their development of new businesses. Indeed, this was supported by comments made by many survey participants, that the high bureaucracy associated with innovating/starting businesses in rural areas represent an important break to the entrepreneurship. Some interviewees underlined the risk that only unqualified employment is generated in rural areas, which is easy to relocate with global supply chains, thus offering only temporary solutions to rural areas.

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<sup>2</sup> 24% from the private sector, 19% from the civil society, 19% from regional public administration, 10% from local public administration, 8% representing research and academics, and 21% "others" (3.5% did not answer).



Related to this is the structural change that the agriculture sector is undergoing, leading to fewer family farm holdings and larger individual farms, often operating as enterprises with hired, external workforce, often on temporary contracts. Thus, the family farming model which has had – and still has – a very important role for rural areas in Aragón is increasingly disappearing. Indeed, several survey participants pointed out that policy makers need to focus their attention on the primary sector and re-think the current policy support structure (including the Common Agricultural Policy) in order to contribute to a sustainable agriculture sector both from an economic, social and environmental point of view.

Also increasing access to basic services (education, health care and transports) as well as to housing ranked high among the challenges identified by the survey participants, with 88% of the respondents considering this a very important or important challenge. 86% considered the development of services for young citizens and families essential. With regard to services, improving the provision of public transport was highlighted by both interviewees and survey participants as a key challenge to solve in order to maintain people in rural areas, permitting to close the physical gap between urban and rural areas. The mismatch between the current offer of education for young people and the needs of employers in rural areas was highlighted, further contributing to the lack of work force with the adequate preparation experienced by employers, and to the human capital flight among young people. Furthermore, the necessity to improve the offer of housing, both for rental and purchase, has been pointed out frequently.

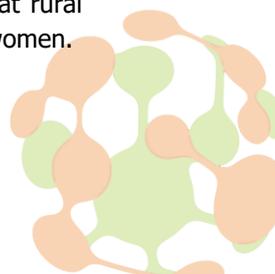
With regard to opportunities for rural areas in Aragón over the coming 20 years, the interviewees found that digitalisation offers the best tool to close the gap between rural and urban areas. It offers the possibility of working from a distance, thereby potentialising more work opportunities in rural areas. It also offers the possibility of on-line teaching, on-line medical consultations, and a virtual cultural offer. Among the survey participants, 75% considered that tele-working and the increasing digitalisation of the economy represent important or very important opportunities for rural Aragón. 80% considered the development of innovative provision of public services an important action that can contribute to the maintenance of population in rural areas. The COVID 19 pandemic has led society to experience this at an intensive scale, and thereby propelled developments that were already put in movement, as pointed out by both interviewees and survey participants.

The most important opportunity, according to survey participants, was the potential for an increase of demand of locally produced goods, considered important or very important by 83%. The interviewees agreed with the related development of short supply-chains as an important opportunity (found to be important by 72% of the survey participants), and also highlighted the increasing frequency of on-line sales to further contribute to the new organisation of production and distribution. In combination, this offer increasing possibilities for SMEs to operate from rural locations.

In addition, interviewees underlined that the sustainable management of natural resources is important as a tool to increase attractiveness of rural areas and to generate growth and employment opportunities, which was a sentiment also shared by survey participants. Between 65% and 68% of the survey participants considered that elements related to "Increasing demand for organically produced products", "Development of the bioeconomy", "Increasing demand of renewable energies", and "Environmental services" represent important opportunities for rural Aragón. With regard to renewable energies, some participants to the consensus meeting warned that, although the investments in renewable energies can provide benefits for rural areas, it may also have the converse effects. A too strong focus on renewable energies may lead to depopulation, if agriculture production is replaced by parks of solar panels and windmills, where the majority of the benefits are channelled to urban areas.

### 3.2. Desirable future for 2040

By 2040, rural areas in Aragón are economically diverse and sustainable. 82% of the survey participants considered this the most desirable future vision. All interviewees agreed on the necessity for the future rural areas to be sustainable – from an economic, social, and environmental perspective and added that rural areas shall in 20 years, ideally, be an attractive place to live for all generations, for men as well as women.



The interviewees expressed the desire for a future scenario where the management of natural resources will be done in a sustainable manner, contributing to the revalorisation of existing natural resources. The agriculture sector will maintain its role as an important employer in rural areas, but the sector will have adapted to new, modern technologies improving efficiencies in the production. At the same time, the new social organisation linked to new production and distribution forms with short supply-chains and on-line sales will facilitate the future existence of family farms.

The interviewees underlined that, in 20 years, it was seen as desirable to have a better rural-urban connection and a revalorisation of the role of rural areas in the society as a whole. In fact, a low degree of rural-urban connection and low self-esteem of rural citizens is, by some, considered an important obstacle in the effort of attempting to dynamise rural areas in Aragón today. Several survey respondents and interviewees considered that the feeling of being second level citizens among the rural population in Aragón is linked to a general perception in the society that life in cities is better, with a better offer of work opportunities, education, health care, and a better cultural offer etc.

At the same time, among the rural population, the quality of life in rural areas is considered, in general, to be high. And the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic are expected to make it even more interesting for today's urban citizens to seek connections with rural areas as well as lead to a revalorisation of the quality of life offered in these areas (less stress, less contamination, closer to nature, etc.). This will intrinsically lead to increased self-esteem among rural citizens. In fact, the demand for new and healthier ways of living represented a very important or important opportunity for rural Aragón among 75% of the survey respondents, whereas 65% considered that the negative aspects associated with life in urban areas represents an opportunity for rural areas.

By 2040, according to interviewees, the desire is that the link between science and rural areas will be better, and the presence of foresight analysis will contribute to improving the rural-urban connection (this was the third most desired vision by survey participants, 67%).

In 20 years, according to the interviewees and survey respondents, society is also expected to have adopted to all the benefits offered from digitalisation. Digitalisation will facilitate for a large share of the population to work from a distance, it will provide a new organisation of health care services where for example the first visit can be done virtually, and it will make possible the provision of education in a more flexible format both in terms of form, time and space.

### 3.3. Enablers to achieve the vision

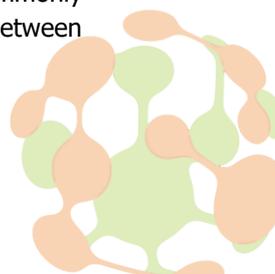
According to more than 80% of the survey participants, four actions can help obtaining the visions outlined above:

- "Increased budget and establishment of priorities" (85%),
- "Increased participation by local citizens in the establishment of strategies and priorities" (83%),
- "Better coordination between public administrations" (83%), and
- "Development of innovative service provision" (80%).

These options were also discussed with the participants to the consensus meeting.

All consensus meeting participants agreed that the financial resources to satisfy needs of rural areas are significant, but some underlined that the issue is not necessarily the availability of funds, but the possibility and the (technical) capacity of the rural population to use the support available to them. Rather than increasing the budget, a re-priorisation of the available budget together with a strengthened capacity of the population to take advantage of the funds, as well as improved communication regarding the support available, could provide significant benefits.

The importance of the role of public policy making in shaping the future of rural areas was commonly accepted, and the consensus meeting participants also agreed with the importance of prioritising between



policy goals and the importance of coordinated and focused actions where rural citizens are actively participating in the decision making.

**Improved coordination:** There is an agreement on the need to better focus and coordinate the actions and policies targeting rural areas, on all administrative levels, to avoid overlaps or contradictory policies. But increased coordination, both vertically and horizontally, is considered a major challenge due to cultural and historical reasons. Several consensus meeting participants were of the opinion that a special entity/agency within the public administration with the responsibility for rural development issues may be beneficial. This entity should be responsible for coordinating, and/or express an opinion on, all existing policies, and policies to be developed, with an impact on rural areas.

**Better prioritisation:** Because of the lack of coordination, several interviewees also sensed that there is a lack of prioritisation between policy goals. The participants to the consensus meeting were fairly united in that the starting point for prioritisation has to be the definition of objective criteria to define rurality and development. Based on this, guidelines/strategies at national and regional level, both for the short- and long-term, can be developed. It is important that the strategies do not only focus on economic priorities but also on other goals (social, environmental etc). The importance of evaluating the implementation of previous policies in order to set priorities for the future was also underlined.

**Increase rural citizens active participation in the decision-making process:** Most attendants of the consensus meeting considered that sufficient mechanisms exist for stimulating the participation of local citizens, the difficulty lies in motivating the rural (often older) citizens to use them. LEADER is one important tool that has a crucial role at local level. But it was considered to have limited impact on the policy design at regional/national level, which could be improved. Some were of the opinion that more has to be done to motivate young citizens to participate in local politics. Other considered that additional tools are needed, such as for example the implementation of "rural proofing", allowing to analyse all new and existing laws from the point of view of its impacts on rural citizens, which would increase the awareness of rural citizens of their possibility to influence.

**Improved implementation of rural policies:** Most participants to the consensus meeting agreed that, in order to improve efficiencies and increase the economies of scale related to the provision of basic services, there is a need to look beyond the local anchor and search common solutions at a higher administrative level than the municipality level. This can be done through:

- Better coordination between municipalities to share responsibilities, for example through common projects implemented at an supra-municipality level, rather than multiplying all efforts for each municipality, but the mechanisms for this coordination are currently often missing.
- And/or through transfer of increased powers/responsibilities to a higher administrative level (for example to the counties<sup>3</sup>) to avoid the multiplication effect.

Ensuring the continued digitalisation, and that no-one is left behind, is an essential enabler for rural areas to reach the desired visions for 2040, as agreed by all consensus meeting participants. Despite Aragón being one of the Spanish regions with better internet access, the ones without access to internet are the ones in the most remote areas, where the risk of depopulation is the greatest. Hence, maximising the digital outreach and develop an on-line offer of public services will make it possible and more attractive to more citizens to live and work in rural areas. However, there are defects in the service provision, according to survey participants and interviewees, which cannot be solved through an increased on-line offer, such as public transport and the housing situation.

A majority of the survey participants were of the opinion that the quality of life in rural areas is high, but that in order to increase the attractiveness additional employment opportunities need to be generated. The consensus meeting participants commonly agreed that with more work opportunities, the quality of life would be (even) higher in rural areas. Divergent ideas were expressed regarding how and where to generate jobs.

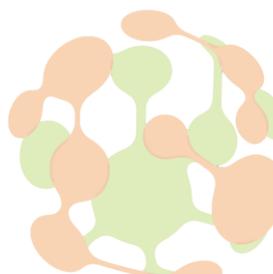
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<sup>3</sup> which in Aragón normally represent between 10-20 000 citizens



Some underlined the importance of working with the young population, and supporting entrepreneurship in order to generate meaningful employment. Others considered that digitalisation was key and would in itself ensure that more people could work from the country side. Another opinion was that the focus of the job creation should be on the county capitals, as economies of scale are needed. Other focused on the importance of agriculture for the rural economy, whereby increased efforts to modernise the agricultural production and adapting it to the new, green context, would ensure employment opportunities, while the family farming model is maintained.

Even so, several participants to the consensus meeting were of the opinion that there is an ongoing societal trend where cities attract young citizens, in particular women, which is difficult to fight against and that is not only related to the offer of job opportunities, but rather to the priorities of the individuals. Thus, regardless of the job opportunities created in rural areas, the pull from the cities on, in particular, young citizens will continue to be present.



## Annex 1. Methodology used in the MAP

### Step 1. Desk research & Context analysis

Through desk-based research the current and likely trends for the rural areas of Aragón were identified. Statistics on key indicators and data was collected. Analysis of regional publications and foresight exercises was undertaken.

The issues identified were discussed during the interviews (step 2) and brought up in the survey (step 3).

### Step 2. Interviews

The challenges and opportunities as well as the future of rural areas in Aragón was discussed through two on-line group interview sessions in June 2020. One session contained 5 MAP members, and the second contained 4 MAP members. Each session had the representation from each community (science, society, policy). The main issues identified were used for preparing the survey (Step 3) and for the preparation of the MAP Discussion paper. The interview material was also used for the MAP Position Paper drafting.

Ahead of the interview sessions, a discussion paper, in Spanish, outlining the main findings from the desk research was shared with the interviewees. In addition, 5 questions were sent to the MAP members as a basis for the discussion, addressing: trends, challenges, opportunities, vision and actions. An additional question on the impact of COVID-19 was also included.

### Step 3. Interview analysis, writing MAP Discussion Paper and preparation of survey

The analysis was conducted in order to provide 2 types of output: 1) lessons learned for the MAP discussion paper presented in July 2020 and 2) input into the survey (step 4).

The most important opportunities and challenges to overcome were identified and ranked. Differences between different actors perspectives identified.

### Step 4. MAP survey: Ranking the challenges and opportunities, and enablers to overcome challenges

Based on the desk research and the interviews, the key trends, challenges and opportunities, enablers and hinders in rural development up until 2040 in Aragón were identified. These made the basis for the survey drafting.

The survey was launched for 8 calendar days in September 2020 and was circulated through the collaboration of the MAP members and other contacts from the MAP facilitator and monitor's network. It had 366 respondents. 24% from the private sector, 19% from the civil society, 19% from regional public administration, 10% from local public administration, 8% representing research and academics, and 21% "others" (3.5% did not answer to what sector they belong).

The survey contained 5 multiple choice questions related to:

- The trends considered the most relevant
- The opportunities considered the most important
- The challenges considered the most important
- The vision for rural Aragón for 2040
- And the actions regarded the most important to be undertaken in order to reach that vision.

In addition, free text was allowed for each question, and at the end of the survey, for the survey respondents to be able to add information considered relevant.

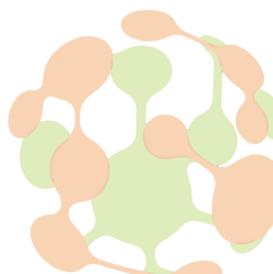


Step 5. Survey analysis & develop draft position paper

In combination with the results of the desk research and interviews, the survey results were used to write the MAP Position Paper. This paper was developed prior to the consensus meeting and shared with the MAP members prior to the meeting (in Spanish). The consensus meeting will serve to validate the findings.

Step 6. Validate the results in a consensus meeting

The consensus meeting served to share the findings from previous steps, discuss them, validate them and enable the finalisation of the MAP Position paper. After the meeting and once an agreement is found, the MAP position paper will be shared with the entire project.



## Annex 2. References

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