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Rural Science-Society-Policy
Interfaces

MAP Position Paper

CHANGE IN PRODUCTION AND DIVERSIFICATION OF THE RURAL ECONOMY



SHERPA has received funding from the European Union's Horizon 2020 Research and Innovation Programme under Grant Agreement No. 862448. The content of the document does not reflect the official opinion of the European Union. Responsibility for the information and views expressed therein lies entirely with the author(s).

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Citation: Bardají, I., Soriano, S., Folkesson, C. (2022) MAP Position Paper (Spain, Aragón) - Change in production and diversification of the rural economy.
DOI: 10.5281/zenodo.5920913

Paper finalised in October 2021

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Topic and headline messages

Efforts to diversify the rural economy will only be fruitful if the general living conditions and standards are in place, such as housing, communication, and services. Without adequate general living conditions, people will continue to emigrate from rural areas regardless of the efforts made to generate work opportunities.

In order to diversify the rural economy, sectoral approaches will only be partially effective. Instead, a comprehensive and horizontal strategy is needed, incorporating all sectors and themes. This strategy should be the foundation for coordinated actions undertaken by all actors involved.

The kind of actions that will be effective in stimulating the diversification of the rural economy are different in different rural areas, mainly related to how close to an urban centre the rural area is located.

Problem being addressed and key questions

This Position Paper takes a wide view in its assessment of diversification of the rural economy. The main dimension analysed relates to the creation of employment, entrepreneurship and new business models. As such, digitalisation, bioeconomy and sustainable management of resources, as well as farm diversification are understood as aspects that are integral to this dimension, rather than being separate issues, as these dimensions are important instruments for generating employment, and many times contain an element of entrepreneurship and/or new business models.

The key questions addressed are:

- 1) What are the key needs for the development of the rural economy in Aragón, and how can these be addressed most effectively?
- 2) How can policy interventions support positive changes in the diversification of the rural economy, considering solutions that are needed at the local and national levels, and any implications for the wider policy framework (European Union level or others)? What can public administrations (at all levels) do to facilitate and encourage positive changes in the diversification of the rural economy?
- 3) What are the research needs and gaps?

1. Diversification of the rural economy: Entrepreneurship, employment & new business models

1.1. Key scientific evidence

1.1.1 Current situation and key trends in rural Aragón

In order to assess the potential of diversification of the rural economy of Aragón, the key trends of these rural areas are outlined below, setting the context against which any recommendations for actions can be assessed. For a more detailed background on the key trends, see MAP Discussion Paper, A vision for rural areas /Spain /Aragón: [MAP Discussion Paper ES Aragon.pdf \(rural-interfaces.eu\)](https://rural-interfaces.eu/Map-Discussion-Paper-ES-Aragon.pdf)

Decreasing population in rural areas. About 70% of the Aragonese population is concentrated in municipalities of more than 10 000 inhabitants, and the majority, 51%, live in its capital, Zaragoza. The share of rural population is 15.9%, a decrease by 8.9% between 2008 and 2018 (CESA, 2018).

Rural areas are characterised by an ageing population, negative population growth rates and an outflow of the young population. Aragón is the second-most aged European region (comparing the share of the population over 80 years to the total population over 64 years), and at NUTS3 level, Teruel, one of the three provinces, ranks second and Huesca, another province, ranks seventh (Eurostat, 2016).

The dependency rate relates the economically inactive population (under 16 years and 65 years and older) to the active population, underlining the weight of economically dependent people in the society. The Aragonés dependency rate has increased from 50.9% to 57.8% over the past decade, indicating that the economically inactive population has intensified (it is 4 percentage points higher than the national average) (CESA, 2019).

The main reason for the decline of the active population is the loss of the population aged 16 and over. This phenomenon is mainly explained by the exodus of young people to other places in search of new job opportunities. Approximately 25 600 people ceased to be part of the population over 15 years since 2010, and the share of young Aragonese (15-34 years) residing outside Spain increased by 90% between 2009 and 2017.

The province of Zaragoza has the lowest average age (44.3), and a lower dependency rate. Teruel shows the most extreme results, with an average age of 46.4 and an old-age dependency rate of 24.1% (21.6% for Aragón as a whole), and a share of over-ageing of 43% (36.3% for Aragón).

Rural areas also face a bigger challenge with increasing masculinisation, due to the out migration of women. The counties that have the most important urban centres are those that record the lowest masculinity data (Government of Aragón, 2017).

Agriculture production is of essential importance in numerous counties. Services, including retail trade and the restaurant sector, is the main income generating activity in all 33 Aragonese counties. In 26 of the counties, the construction sector is the second main income generating activity. In 28 counties, agriculture and related services is one of the top-4 economic activities, although only in seven counties is agriculture the second income generating activity after services. 4.4% of the Aragonese work force is employed in agriculture, but in Huesca, that share is almost 10%. Less than 20% of the farm managers are women (Government of Aragón, 2017).

1.1.2 Key scientific evidence in relation to diversification of the rural economy and entrepreneurship in Aragón

Economic diversification into farm and non-farm activities is gaining relevance in the rural economic development and policy literature as it plays a strategic role in rural livelihood systems (Ryser & Halseth, 2010). At global scale, income derived from non-farm sources represents 40-60% of the total farm income (Davis et al., 2009).

Diversifying contributes to income growth of rural households as well as facilitate farmers with coping mechanisms to face farm income volatility (Figurek et al., 2012). According to Davis et al. (2009) the non-farm sector may absorb excess labour from the agricultural sector and urban-rural migration, promote a more equitable distribution of income, thus enhancing the economic viability of rural towns and villages. Figurek et al. (2012) add that diversification strengthens the link between agriculture and other sectors of the rural economy.

To promote economic diversification in rural areas, ILO (2014) proposes to focus technical advice on the sectors with higher employment creation potential and define policies that support job creation in these sectors. According to Castellano-Álvarez et al. (2019) to develop and diversify rural economies must overcome the risk of excessive concentration of investments in specific sectors, e.g. the tourism sector.

Davis et al. (2009) also find that economic diversification requires collaboration between public institutions that goes beyond a sectoral approach. In this sense, Bright et al. (2000) claim the importance for a cross-disciplinary, multi-sectoral approach to foster economic diversification. Furthermore, not only regional authorities but also local stakeholders such as banks, providers and distributors should be involved. Finally, a good infrastructure, services provision and education/ advisory service are needed.

Economic diversification is addressed in the SWOT analysis of the region of Aragón. The regional authority finds that diversification contributes to overcoming some of the key weaknesses of the rural areas in the Aragón region. Diversification facilitates job creation, entrepreneurship and services provision in rural areas, promotes innovation, cooperation and knowledge-based development (Government of Aragón, 2021a). The regional Government (Government of Aragón, 2021b) also defends the idea that making it easier for women to get employment in rural areas enhances rural economy diversification.

The National Rural Network (2021) has analysed the main bottlenecks to entrepreneurship in rural areas in Aragón. They found that the main reasons for the high level of abandonment of business initiatives are the complex bureaucracy and access to finance, the entrepreneur's profile (low experience in leading companies, poor and non-realistic business plans, lack of market orientation of the new enterprises and non-suitable business location), and social and economic factors such as the depopulation in rural areas, the ageing and "masculinisation" of the rural population, services centralisation in the major cities and the lack of training in entrepreneurship, support to reconcile work and family life, communication infrastructures and working facilities.

1.1.3 Needs in rural Aragón and policy implications

The key need resulting from the trends outlined above, in relation to the diversification of the rural economy, could be summarised as follows: **Rural areas should be able to offer citizens the possibility of having a job and of developing an income-generating activity.** If that need is being met, then the depopulation of rural areas could slow down, the young population could stay on, and women would find it easier to stay on, thereby reversing the trend of masculinisation.

Several policies are actively targeting, or trying to reverse, the key trends identified above. These policies include EU programmes, such as the Rural Development Programme and the Cohesion policy, but also national and regional initiatives.

At EU level, the Communication "A vision for rural areas towards 2040" is a European Commission initiative to develop a common European vision for 2040, containing a rural action plan to help guide rural communities and businesses, centred around four areas of action: stronger, connected, resilient and prosperous rural areas. The Spanish Government has developed a strategy against depopulation, which is being made operational through a plan consisting of 130 measures¹. These measures are being funded through the European Recovery Fund.

¹ [130 Medidas ante el Reto Demográfico \(miteco.gob.es\)](https://www.miteco.gob.es/)

The Aragón government is currently developing a Law, "Dynamisation of rural Aragón" (Anteproyecto de Ley de dinamización del mundo rural en Aragón)², with the objective of targeting in a coordinated manner the necessities and opportunities of rural areas in the region.

The main actors at regional level include the Government of Aragón Department for Economy, Planning and Employment (DEPE, *Departamento de Economía, Planificación y Empleo del Gobierno de Aragón*), and the Directorate-General for Territorial Cohesion (DG-OT, *Dirección General de Ordenación del Territorio*), the Department for Industry, Connectivity and Business Development (*Departamento de Industria, Conectividad y Desarrollo empresarial*) as well as the regional Department for Agriculture and Rural Development (DAGM, *Departamento de Agricultura, Ganadería y Medio Ambiente del Gobierno de Aragón*).

Currently, several programmes are implemented which directly or indirectly target the rural economy of Aragón. For example, DEPE manages programmes offering economic support aimed at countering the depopulation of rural areas by supporting the generation of employment³, supporting in particular the generation of employment for women, and by supporting rural entrepreneurs financially. Other examples include support for providing the infrastructure for making it possible to set-up new enterprises in rural areas, as well as a limited form of support for family businesses⁴.

Through the implementation of the Cohesion fund, DG-OT offers, for example, support for the implementation of awareness campaigns around the objective of generating a positive attitude towards rural values and the Aragón natural and cultural heritage, support for the reformation of housing with the objective to rent it out to the local population, support for the establishment of co-working spaces, and support for expanding the calendar of the cultural offer⁵.

The department for Agriculture and Rural development, DAGM, implements the Rural Development Programme, which contains several measures of relevance that contribute to the diversification of the rural economy. These are in particular Measure 6, 7 and 19⁶.

² [Información pública del Anteproyecto de Ley de dinamización del medio rural en Aragón. Gobierno de Aragón \(aragon.es\)](https://www.aragon.es/informacion-publica-del-anteproyecto-de-ley-de-dinamizacion-del-medio-rural-en-aragon)

³ For example, support for companies hiring of staff currently unemployed or on temporary work contracts, and this support is 10% higher if the population of the town where the employment is created is between 500 to 5 000 citizens. Where the population is below 500, this support is 20% higher.

⁴ Creación y consolidación del empleo en cooperativas de trabajo asociado y sociedades laborales ORDEN EIE/607/2016, de 6 de junio, 2016; Subvenciones al emprendimiento ORDEN EPE/35/2021, de 28 de enero 2021;

⁵ Convocatoria de ayudas para el año 2021 a entidades sin ánimo de lucro para la realización de actuaciones relacionadas con el desarrollo. ORDEN VMV/510/2021-/RESOLUCIÓN de 4 de agosto de 2021; subvenciones para la realización, durante el año 2021, de actuaciones relacionadas con el desarrollo de la Directriz Especial de Política Demográfica y contra la Despoblación con cargo al Fondo de Cohesión Territorial por entidades locales ORDEN VMV/511/2021

⁶ M6: Farm and business development, including sub-measures:

- 6.1: Start-up support for young farmers.
- 6.2: Support for the creation of enterprises for non-agricultural activities in rural areas.
- 6.3: Aid for the creation of enterprises for the development of small holdings.
- 6.4: Investment support for the development of non-agricultural activities.
- 6.5: Payments to farmers who permanently transfer their holding to another farmer.

M 7: Basic services and village renewal, including sub-measures:

In Aragón, Measure 19: support for LEADER, is by far the most relevant tool to support the diversification of rural economies. This measure supports bottom-up actions, through a network of Local Action Groups (LAGs). In Aragón there are 20 LAGs, many of which have been active for 30 years. The regional administration has set 6 priorities for its LEADER programme for the current programming period (2014-2020). The LAGs in turn set their priorities for the local level, and implement the budget assigned to them. This can be used for all types of actions contributing to supporting the rural economy, many of which could also be funded through M6 and M7. The difference being that for M6 and M7, there is a top-down governance. In Aragón, the policy choice has been not to support parallel measures through top-down actions, as there is a fear that this would “empty” the LEADER programme of its content, but rather to channel all support for the diversification of rural economy through the LEADER programme. Approximately 10% of the total RDP budget is devoted to LEADER (EUR 78 million for the full programming period)⁷.

In addition to the measures discussed, other RDP measures could also be used to support the diversification of rural economies, such as M1: knowledge transfer; M2: training; M3: quality production; M4: investment support, and M16: cooperation. Even if these are used in Aragón, they are considered of less relevance for supporting the diversification of the rural economy.

Focusing on entrepreneurship, there are diverse support programmes in Aragón led by regional public entities (Aragón Exterior, Instituto Aragonés de Empleo, Instituto Aragonés de Fomento) and private ones (Asociación de Autónomos de Aragón-UPTA Aragón, Asociación de jóvenes empresarios de Aragón-AJE Aragón, Jóvenes dinamizadores rurales). Most of these initiatives provide training courses, and advisory and mentoring support to the entrepreneurs. Additionally, there are also programmes that facilitate funds to foster the entrepreneurship led by financial institutions such as Fundación Ibercaja, Avalia, Fundación Aragón Invierte, and the Aragón Business Angel Network (National Rural Network, 2021).

In addition, there are numerous awards stimulating entrepreneurship in rural areas in Spain and in Aragón, some of which are particularly targeting women. For example, the national Ministry of Agriculture and Fisheries (MAPA) offers awards related to innovation in agriculture and fisheries, to innovation in diversification of economic activities in rural areas, as well as a specific award directed to support women in rural areas. There is also a European project, EWA (Empowering Women in Agrifood)⁸ where Spain is one of the participating Member States (through Grupo cooperativo tangente). The programme includes financial support, training and personalised mentoring for six months for a total of 10 women in the agriculture sector.

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- 7.1: Support for Plans for municipal and village development (can be used for example for renewable energy plans and access to ICT, as well as ‘community plans’).
 - 7.2: Support for small-scale infrastructures (to improve basic living conditions in rural areas and connectivity to other areas).
 - 7.3: Support for broadband infrastructures.
 - 7.4: Support for local basic services (including health, childcare, mobility, cultural services, infrastructures for community services, leisure activities, etc.).

⁷ As a share of the EARDF budget, this is approximately 13-14%, as the Member State co-financing rate is lower for this measure than for other measures.

⁸ <https://tangente.coop/eit-food-lanza-en-espana-el-programa-ewa-apoyo-a-emprendedoras-agroalimentarias/>

1.1.4 Examples of good practices related to the identified needs

Several initiatives with examples of good practices have been identified in Aragón related to the diversification of the rural economy. Two cases are described below. The first relates to farm diversification (Ecomonegros), a private initiative consisting of the recovery of a traditional wheat variety, now grown regionally in an organic manner and with large benefits stemming from the development of the value-added processing of the wheat (bakery products). The second good practice relates to a policy-driven initiative aimed at supporting young entrepreneurs (Jóvenes dinamizadores rurales), in particular in the area of social entrepreneurship and with an important digital tool. However, these are only two examples of several ongoing initiatives in Aragón. In the Appendix, a list with overviews of more examples of good practices can be found.

Ecomonegros

Ecomonegros is a company dedicated to the cultivation, milling and production and sale of flour, bread and pastries. The entire process is handmade, starting with stone grinding and the use of sourdough in all its elaborations. The company is based in Leciñena, a municipality in the Monegros region in the province of Zaragoza, with 1 200 inhabitants.

The main input for the products is the wheat variety Aragón 03, a variety traditionally grown in the region, but which, with the arrival of other more productive varieties, had ceased to be cultivated. In the 1990s, the efforts of Juan José Marcén managed to recover the variety, which later resulted in an expansion of its production, being undertaken organically, throughout the region.

In 2006, the nieces of Juan José, rural entrepreneurs, decided to go one step further and start the transformation of the wheat together with their parents and brother. In the beginning, they were distributing their products to stores, but soon decided to open their own establishment in Zaragoza. Now they have two physical stores and an online store, through which they serve the entire country and employ 13 people. In addition, they do bread workshops in which they share and disseminate their experience. They have received numerous awards, including the 2007 Young Project and 2014 Environment Awards, awarded by the Government of Aragón, the 2008 Bancaja Award to entrepreneurs and the Award for excellence in innovation for rural women granted in 2010 by the Ministry of Agriculture.

Young rural enablers /Jóvenes dinamizadores rurales

This is a cooperation project involving 13 Local Action Groups of Aragón, financed from the Aragonés RDP, which has been working for 10 years to promote youth initiatives in rural Aragón. The cooperation consists of several initiatives:

- **Informational Antennas**

Formed by a group of young people from 14 to 18 years old who inform other young people in the territory of ongoing activities or new initiatives by disseminating activities of interest.

- **Made in Rural**

Annual call to support entrepreneurship initiatives in which advice, professional accompaniment and financing are offered to carry out social reactivation initiatives in rural areas.

➤ Start-Up

Start-Up programme to support rural youth entrepreneurship through a short-lived rural co-working space, in which a programme of agitation and acceleration of business ideas is carried out for 4 days. The objective is to provide support to young entrepreneurs in order to increase the opportunities for development and consolidation of their projects.

➤ The Rural Era

This is a digital platform with the aim of supporting social entrepreneurship and innovation. It works as a support network for entrepreneurship and youth initiative that facilitates access to advisory services, training, financing and dissemination, with the aim that young people can start their own project.

On the platform, entrepreneurs can have their own space through which they can redirect visitors to their own websites, promote their products or advertise activities. In addition, it allows access to information related to existing aid or procedures necessary to launch the project, in addition to facilitating contact with other entrepreneurs. In addition to the web, it has a mobile app that facilitates the exchange of information. They also launched trainings related to entrepreneurship.

The platform counts with facilitators in the various rural territories of Aragón, young entrepreneurs who can serve as contact points and support to other young people in their regions.

➤ Collaborative spaces

This is a pilot project that tries to promote spaces for collaboration and cooperation that integrate new business formulas. These are rural co-working spaces where entrepreneurs can exchange ideas and search for solutions to develop projects.

1.2. Summary of position of the regional Multi-Actor Platform

Three meetings have been held with the members of the MAP of Aragón (IDRA), two online in June 2021, and the third meeting in Zaragoza in October the same year. The participation has been positive on both occasions, with a relatively balanced participation from the public administration, science, and civil society, also paying attention to the gender balance, and the involvement of young entrepreneurs.

The following section captures the opinions provided by the MAP members in relation to the challenges and opportunities for developing the rural economy in Aragón, and the actions that would be desirable to implement in Aragón in order to further stimulate the diversification. This in turn provides input for the conclusions and recommendations outlined in the following section.

1.2.1 Challenges and opportunities in diversifying the rural economy in Aragón

The first thing to bear in mind when assessing the needs, challenges and opportunities of rural areas in Aragón are that those are not homogenous for all rural areas in the region. Rather, they vary depending on the typology of the rural area in question. Rural areas in the proximity of larger cities have a different situation compared to areas in the periphery with very low population density. As a consequence, also the policy actions needed differ depending on what type of rural area that is considered. When an area is very peripheral, then the MAP members agreed that the most that can be done is to accompany those choosing to live there, to make sure they have a dignified life. In other areas, with higher population density, there are more possibilities to act.

Secondly, MAP members also agreed that general life condition in rural areas has to be improved in order to generate employment – it is a matter of “chicken or the egg”. Employment cannot be maintained and generated in rural areas unless the living conditions are adequate, related to: housing, services (education, healthcare and so on), transport etc. Unless these factors are in place, people will continue to emigrate from rural areas regardless of the efforts made to generate work opportunities.

Bearing this in mind, **the key challenges identified by the MAP members** in order to diversify the rural economy of Aragón relate to:

1. rural areas being able to maintain young citizens and women;
2. citizens of rural areas lack a culture of entrepreneurship, and – where there are entrepreneurs – the instruments and confidence to act are often lacking;
3. adaptation of training and education – there is a lack of qualified workforce in rural areas, and the professional training offered is not adapted to rural needs;
4. the size of the market– rural areas have smaller markets than cities, thus in order to compete with global suppliers (both on price, quality, and extent of offer) additional attention needs to be provided to their regional/national/global market integration;
5. the lack of, and/or poor quality, of the offer of services and support for businesses established in rural areas.

At the same time, some of the MAP members were of the opinion that the only real challenge for rural areas is the loss of talent due to the lack of opportunities to make an income in rural areas. The other identified challenges are rather to be considered as “normal circumstances” for rural citizens, to which they are accustomed to, whereby they do not really pose a challenge in developing economic activities but are rather considered as “part of normal life”.

Furthermore, the development of the agriculture sector, traditionally being the main income generating sector in rural areas, was a contagious part of the discussion. Some MAP members considered this sector to be on an irreversible trend towards increasing monoculture and increasing dependency on global markets. As such, this will inevitably lead to loss of income due to lower competitiveness, as well as a loss of cultural heritage by losing local crops and production traditions. In addition, it was considered a fact by some MAP members that few women are attracted to the agriculture sector, and also this trend seemed difficult to reverse.

However, many MAP members identified several **opportunities for diversifying the economy in rural areas in Aragón** in the coming years.

Among these, some considered the **diversification and modernisation of the family farm activities** an important opportunity for many rural areas – as long as there is policy support for this development. Agriculture was by some considered a sector for the future, where food production and maintenance of natural resources will always be in demand. Hence, clear diverging views on the role of the agriculture sector in the Aragonese rural economy emerged. Also, areas directly linked to the agriculture sector were considered to constitute opportunities for rural areas, such as: the development of the agri-food sector and increasing demand for locally produced, organic food, the increasing need and demand for the agriculture sector to develop environmental services, as well as the possibilities offered by the bioeconomy.

Another opportunity for diversifying the rural economy in Aragón was considered to be the potential for **developing the family and service economy**. For example, the need for a functioning elderly care system, and the potential for developing residencies for the elderly in rural areas. According to some, this service usually works better when developed on a micro rather than macro scale. When they are developed on a macro scale, then they lose the link to the village and there are problems. As such, this brings a lot of potential for increasing the offer in the coming years.

In addition, MAP members were of the opinion that the rural-urban relationship and the **valorisation of rural areas** is changing. People are no longer “escaping” rural areas to the same extent as previously, but there is also a segment of society looking to move to rural areas. This could reinforce the opportunities in the coming years, in particular for the construction sector. This is in turn partly due to **digitalisation**, which will make life in rural areas possible in the long run, and can generate a tremendous cultural change. If this tool is managed well it was considered to be able to put rural areas on equal footing (or better) to cities.

Tourism and renewable energy installations also constitute opportunities. However, if not properly managed, these may rather constitute a trap for rural areas. In relation to tourism, two aspects were brought up:

- Tourism is not relevant for all rural areas. In Aragón it is highly relevant for the Pyrenees, but other areas have very limited touristic value, and so it is not a general rule that investing in tourism will develop employment.
- Where there are existing tourist interests (cultural, nature), tourism cannot be the only income source of a rural area, as it then creates too much economic dependence on this activity. Hence, there have to also be complementary activities which are maintained also without tourism.

With regard to renewable energy installations, there the conflict of interest with other income generating activities, in particular tourism, was discussed, as such an installation may decrease the attractiveness of an area thereby reducing the opportunities stemming from tourism. In addition, it cannot be presumed that renewable energy installations will generate employment in rural areas. Rural areas often do not have the possibility of obtaining the value from the resources it is providing, the benefits go rather to the cities. Hence, the benefits for rural areas from the development of renewable energy installations (such as solar and wind parks, etc.) were not considered to be clear for the moment by the MAP members. Careful planning and coordination is considered to be lacking currently, whereby this may constitute not only a missed opportunity for generating employment in rural areas, but may actually contribute further to their decline.

1.2.2 Actions which can support positive changes in the diversification of the rural economy in Aragón

The MAP members have identified concrete actions which, from their point of view, would be essential to stimulate the diversification of the rural economy in Aragón. **Digitalisation, training and functioning markets were considered the three most important actions**, at least by those MAP members establishing a priority. In addition, the role of public policy and administrations has been assessed, including concrete actions to improve the deliverance of those. Also, different types of actions which are supported and facilitated by public policy have been analysed, including: direct support to the generation of employment; support related to the functioning of the market; training and education; digitalisation; and culture. The financing of these actions, as well as the use of fiscal policy as a tool were also debated.

The continued digitalisation – both in terms of coverage and quality - is considered essential in order to put rural areas on equal grounds to cities. This was considered by the majority of MAP members the best tool available to support the effort of diversifying rural areas in Aragón.

With regard to employment, there were discrepancies among MAP participants regarding the policy priority: should the focus be on **maintaining current employment in rural areas or on generating new employment**? Representatives from the public administration considered that both actions have to be targeted in parallel, whereas representatives from civil society considered that first the issue of how to maintain the current workforce has to be resolved, then focus can be directed towards new possibilities.

Three policy actions were considered important in relation to the maintenance/generation of employment in rural areas:

1. The support for family businesses, as those make up the rural net and have a close link to territory. They live and work rurally, and have the potential to generate large spill-over effects.
2. The support for entrepreneurs, also in areas/services not directly related to their area of action, for example with regard to legal advice, technical support, start-up support, etc.
3. The support for diversification and modernisation of the family farm activities, including:
 - Organic farming, in particular facilitating the distribution which is the main challenge.
 - The support of cooperatives, including putting pressure on the cooperatives to strengthen the competitiveness of their business activities, which would generate more added value for farmers.
 - Support the production of traditional/local crops, as a maintenance of patrimony.
 - Practical support in relation to bioeconomy, in particular with bringing it "down" to the primary producers.

In addition, in order for any public policy action related to maintenance/generation of employment in rural areas to be effective in the long run it was considered **fundamental that there is a functioning market, that production is based on market demand**. As such, policy actions aimed at establishing distribution platforms, support online sales, etc., in order to break the isolation of rural areas were also considered highly relevant.

All MAP members agreed on **the importance of providing adequate training and education in order to improve the possibilities of diversifying rural areas**. Four concrete actions were proposed within this area:

1. Adapting education and professional training to the needs of the rural areas, both to:
 - a. Increase the fit between supply and demand on the rural labour market.
 - b. Change the attitude and culture among rural citizens. This is important already from primary and secondary education, in order to change the attitude of the rural population with the aim of them appreciating and putting value on the area where they live. This could in turn increase the self-esteem of rural citizens, and increase the perceived attractiveness of living in rural areas. It can also contribute to fostering a culture of entrepreneurship and innovation. Hence, education and training can be used as tools to generate confidence among rural citizens and thereby a more entrepreneurial environment.
2. The training/education needs to be adapted to the specific rural circumstances of where the education/training is taking place – entrepreneurs have different needs in different rural areas.
3. At the same time, the facilitation of the connection between entrepreneurs from different rural areas in other regions was mentioned as an important tool, in order to exchange experiences, have mentorship programmes, etc. Online training with flexible schedules was mentioned as key for rural stakeholders, in order to be able to fit it in with other obligations.
4. The continued training support for small businesses is also an important tool. In Aragón/Spain, multiple training opportunities for start-up businesses are available, but once the business is up and running, there is a lack of training possibilities, such as: business management for small/rural enterprises, including management of finances, time and mentality.

In relation to the **practical support of rural entrepreneurs from the regional government**, the following actions were assessed as important: 1) reduce bureaucracy by, for example, allowing for more administrative procedures to be done online, and 2) improve the relationships between regional administrations and rural areas/rural citizens. It was considered difficult to find the support needed for local entrepreneurs, as "no one knows them" in the regional administrations.

The support of cultural activities facilitates the diversification of the rural economy as it increases the chances of the young population staying. Cultural activities should not merely be supported with the purpose of attracting tourism, but the focus of the support for cultural activities should be to make the rural areas attractive for those living there, thus as a tool to maintain and attract a permanent population. In particular, the cultural offer should be better adapted to the young population.

EU and regional administrations are instrumental in the development of rural areas, but better coordination between the different administrative levels as well as a horizontal rather than sectoral focus is considered desirable. Policymaking on all levels of competencies – local, regional, national and EU – is considered relevant in relation to supporting rural areas and contributing to their diversification. The various administrations address different needs at different scales. However, some of the MAP members were of the opinion that the most relevant administrative levels in Spain in this regard are the EU level and the regional level. The EU sets an important framework and can play an instrumental role, leading the way by setting objectives with the Rural Development Policy. In Spain, rural development is a regional competency, and as such regional policy is highly relevant. However, an issue in this regard is that the regional government has only a very limited budget, and is as such dependent on other administrative levels (national, EU) to develop initiatives and to support its policy. This is a clear obstacle in the smooth and structured contribution to the development of rural areas.

In relation to this, it was considered that better coordination between different administrative levels is needed. A problem identified in order for this to work smoothly is that many administrations are working sector-wise rather than horizontally. It was also considered worrying by many MAP members that in the Spanish national plan for recuperation and resilience, rural development has very marginal visibility. The only topic addressed in this regard is depopulation, however MAP members underlined that the challenge is territorial, it is not only a demographic challenge, whereby this was considered a missed opportunity by the national government to give an important push to rural areas.

Actions that were proposed to improve the coordination and implementation of rural policy included: 1) the common definition of a clear objective with rural development policy which would facilitate the prioritisation among the policy actions to be implemented, and 2) emphasis on “rural proofing” – ensuring that laws and regulations that are developed do not disfavour rural areas.

The importance of the LEADER programme in being able to bring about positive developments for rural areas was underlined by several MAP members. Two aspects were discussed in relation to how this EU policy could be strengthened regionally, thereby contributing further to diversification of the rural economy:

- Stronger focus on supporting innovation. LEADER had initially two pillars: the bottom-up approach and the promotion of innovative actions. Over time, much of the focus has been directed towards the first pillar, whereas the latter was considered to need more attention. LEADER could support the bioeconomy and circular economy actions, new productive sectors etc. but that is rarely done. More innovation is needed in rural areas, and this policy instrument could be used better in this regard.

- More efficient administration at regional level can free up resources for more practical support. LEADER in Aragón has worked very well and is a national reference for being well organised and developed. However, the management of public money requires substantial human resources, which eats up resources that could be devoted to developing local initiatives, activities, innovation, etc. Hence, in order to generate more activities, more human resources in the LEADER groups should ideally be freed up. As such, one idea being explored is to replace the current 20 administrative structures with one administrative LEADER structure for all Aragón, but still maintaining the 20 local offices, which would free up more resources for the development of projects. This idea is being discussed, but has still not been implemented.

A distinctive budget line at national/regional level for rural development would help to better focus the policy being implemented. To rely on financing within the RDPs of the CAP, where financing

of rural economic development is also competing with many other funding areas, means that this aspect is not given the appropriate attention.

Some MAP members were of the opinion that the financing exists, but that the challenge is the lack of good projects and ideas in rural areas. When there are good projects, there is financing to support them. However, the critical mass for developing good projects has often been lost in the areas that mostly need the funding, instead the financing goes to the richer rural areas, where there is a critical mass, and so there has to be a paradigm change in order to address this.

With regard to private financing, it was pointed out that usually the older generation has more resources, but they are often not interested in investing. For example, they may not be willing to rent out housing or storehouses. This generation is overall reluctant to “move the money” to create added value for rural areas. Additional incentives for this generation could bring about a positive change.

Actions related to fiscality are by most MAP members not considered relevant in supporting the diversification of the rural economy in Aragón. They were by many considered unjust and with limited proven impact. For example, it was not assessed to be an interesting tool to attract companies to invest in rural Aragón. The lack of language and technological skills means that laxer fiscality rules would not attract companies to invest in rural Aragón, and as such, would not generate more employment in rural areas. However, for certain limited aspects fiscality could be an important tool, for example to invest in housing.

1.2.3 Current policy implementation and lessons learned

As outlined for the previous section, several policy initiatives are currently being implemented in Aragón which target the key needs. In the below table, these have been linked to the desired policy actions, as identified by the MAP members.

	Actions desired	Current policy actions	Implementing actor
Digitalisation	Continued digitalisation - coverage and quality	Digital agenda of Spain 2025 ⁹	
generation of employment	Generation of employment in rural areas*	Economic support to companies creating new job opportunities, higher support in rural areas	DEPE
		Municipal infrastructure subsidies for the promotion of business activity	DG-OT
	Including generation of employment for women in rural areas*	Economic support to female entrepreneurs higher than for men, and higher in rural areas	DEPE
		Training courses to promote female self-employment	DG-OT
	Support of family businesses	Support for entrepreneurs within family businesses	DEPE
	Support of entrepreneurs		
	* including Financial support	Support for entrepreneurs (higher for women and in rural areas)	DEPE
	*and Technical/legal support, etc.	Enabling infrastructures for the creation of training spaces for employment and/or co-working	DG-OT
farm diversification	Support of diversification and modernisation of family farm activities, including		

⁹ [Presentada la Agenda España Digital 2025 | GTT](#)

	*Organic (including distribution)	RDP, M11	DAGM
	*Cooperatives (including strengthening their business activities)	RDP, M16	DAGM
	*Production of traditional crops	RDP, M10	DAGM
	*Practical support in relation to bioeconomy	RDP, supported through various measures including LEADER	DAGM
functioning markets	Support for distribution platforms, online sales, etc.	RDP, could be supported through LEADER	
training and education	Adaptation of education and professional training to increase the fit between supply and demand on the labour market	Not clear to what extent this is currently undertaken	
	Adaptation of education and professional training to change the attitude among rural citizens	Support for the implementation of awareness campaigns around the objective of generating a positive attitude towards the rural value and the Aragonese natural and cultural heritage	DG-OT
	Adaptation of education and professional training to specific rural circumstances of where the training/education takes place	Not clear to what extent this is currently undertaken	
	Connection between entrepreneurs from different rural areas	*M16 RDP - cooperation between LAGs *DG OT: Enabling infrastructures for the creation of training spaces for employment and/or co-working	DAGM DG-OT
	Continued training support for small businesses (not only start-up support)	Not clear to what extent this is currently undertaken	
culture and services	Support of cultural activities for the permanent population (in particular young citizens)	De-stationalisation of the cultural offer	DG-OT
	Attending to housing needs of rural population	Financing of investment projects rehabilitating municipally owned buildings for rent to finance the staying-on of the local population	DG-OT
administration and policy	More administrative procedures related to business management could be done online	Not clear to what extent this is currently undertaken	
	Improved relationship between administrations and rural citizens	Not clear to what extent this is currently being integrated in the policy work	
	Better coordination between different administrative levels and between different sectors	The development of the Law "Dynamisation of rural Aragón" represents a step in this direction	
	including 1) the common definition of a clear objective with rural development policy	The development of the Law "Dynamisation of rural Aragón" represents a step in this direction	
	and 2) emphasis on "rural proofing" – ensuring that laws and regulations that are developed do not disfavour rural areas.	Not clear to what extent this is currently being undertaken	
	Stronger focus on innovation in LEADER	To be recommended for the upcoming programming period	
	More efficient administration at regional level of the LEADER programme to free-up resources to finance activities	Ongoing work	

*Note that these policy actions have been identified outside of the discussions with the MAP members, but were considered to adequately reflect the desires of the MAP members

**DEPE is Departamento de Economía, Planificación y Empleo del Gobierno de Aragón, DG-OT is Dirección General de Ordenación del Territorio del Gobierno de Aragón, and DAGM is Departamento de Agricultura, Ganadería y Medio Ambiente del Gobierno de Aragón.

From the table, it is clear that most actions identified as desirable by the MAP members are already, to varying extents, being implemented through numerous policy actions. With this said, of course, these actions cannot per se necessarily be considered to meet the full needs that the desired actions represent. There may be shortcomings in relation to the budget devoted to a measure, in relation to the demand for a measure in place, or in relation to the design of the measure, to give a few examples.

In order to identify potential gaps between the desired actions and the actions being implemented in relation to the needs they are supposed to correspond to, the question was posed to the MAP members as to what extent the existing measures can be considered to meet the actual needs. The discussion focused on three main actions: 1) Employment generation and entrepreneurship; 2) Economic diversification, family farm diversification and modernisation, and market actions; and 3) Governance.

The response was uniform – the problem is not the actions currently being implemented; the problem is that there is not a coordinated, integrated response going beyond the sectoral interventions. As such, the actions currently being implemented can be considered to address, in a partial manner, specific issues, but what is missing is an integrated approach covering all policy levels and all sectors. As such, any policy action currently implemented can only work as a temporary solution, and does not contribute to reversing the trend of depopulation of rural areas.

It was considered that, as long as the issue of housing – in particular – and also other factors relating to the general standard of living in rural areas such as services and transport, are not resolved, the sectoral, more limited actions undertaken to diversify the economy cannot contribute to miracles. A recently launched subsidy, providing funds for municipalities to restore housing for the use of the local population (for example, renting apartments to young citizens) is a sign of the demand that exist for obtaining housing in rural areas, where the number of applicants far exceeded the funds available.

As illustrations of the lack of a current holistic approach at policy level, three examples were provided:

1. The fact that, in the current **Common Agricultural Policy (CAP)**, approximately EUR 450 million are currently supported annually through pillar I, whereas the RDP budget is about EUR 100 million per year. And about 40% of the pillar I funding goes to farmers already beyond the age of retirement, who are not likely to invest in diversifying the rural economy. As such, prioritising needs and issues to address within the second pillar becomes secondary, and the budget that can be devoted to diversifying the rural economy through the second pillar of the CAP becomes marginal, as this policy issue is there competing with funds that should also be devoted to environmental and climate issues, among other things. Removing the financing from the CAP would make the policy implications clearer, and it would be easier to hold a policy responsible for not delivering in terms of diversifying the rural economy.

In addition to the limited support being devoted to the diversification of the rural economy from the RDP, it was discussed how these policy decisions are taken. Currently, in Spain, there are 17 regional RDPs, where the implementation of the policy in relation to diversification of the rural economy is done through numerous LAGs, where each LAG has its own priorities. As such, the public policy depends on several small pieces of contributions, and there is no top-down steering of the process. As such, the policy coordination is limited, and no coherent actions can be implemented throughout the territory.

2. The design of the distribution of support from the **European Recovery Fund** in Spain, where depopulation of rural areas is treated as a sector, rather than as an aspect that should be kept in mind for all the policy actions being funded through this mechanism. By isolating this issue, other policy areas may integrate actions that counter the objectives of fighting depopulation. The Spanish Government has defined a Recovery Plan with 130 measures to deal with the [Demographic challenge](#) (MITECO, 2020a). It is noteworthy that the catalogue of measures makes no reference to the agricultural sector, housing, or migration labour. Regarding economic activities, tourism is mentioned but with no orientation towards environmental and social sustainability.
3. **The [Integrated National Plan for energy and climate 2021-2030, strategic environmental study and strategic environmental statement](#)** (MITECO, 2020b) defines the long-term aim of turning Spain into a carbon neutral country by 2050. However, the plan does not clearly explain how new energy sources are going to be generated. The plan is expected to lead to increasing investments in rural areas, but in order to steer this to the benefit of rural areas, MAP members were of the opinion that several aspects were missing from the Plan. For example, it does not contain references to territorial cohesion in the short-medium-long term that avoid negative impacts on the existing/future rural population and economies and to the diverse needs. This was taken as another sign of the lack of coordination with the Directorate responsible for cohesion and territorial planning.

The lack of coordination between policy areas has many practical implications for entrepreneurs

on the ground, for example is in relation to the administrative procedures. The complex bureaucracy and the often-poor advisory services provided by local entities demotivate the innovative ideas and cause disaffection with public services. To resolve this, a one-stop shop solution was recommended, where one entrepreneur would have one person to assist, or to go to, for all administrative related aspects, rather than physically having to visit various different offices and to fill out various different forms, undergoing various controls, etc., requiring similar information. Such an initiative could free up a lot of time and resources for the individual entrepreneur. This “one-stop shop” could also serve a role in advising the rural entrepreneurs, who many times have more needs for advice, rather than an economic subsidy, but they do not know who to turn to.

Additionally, the current fiscal regime hinders small companies from growing, as higher incomes are followed by higher tax rates that decrease the net incomes. Consequently, rural entrepreneurs decide to stop growing or split the company.

In addition, it was discussed that the complex bureaucracy and lack of flexible processes many times imply that the public funds go to big investments plans undertaken by large companies, instead of going to smaller projects, which are often more complex to coordinate and supervise. In addition, the decision-making has to be done by the competent authorities under tight deadlines, favouring applicants with a greater capacity to react and present eligible projects. MAP members expressed a wish to overcome this bias to ensure that public funds support those investments that reinforce rural development.

In this regard, the importance of prioritising the family businesses rather than bigger, national/multi-national businesses, was underlined by several MAP members. Multi-nationals do not have local ties and will relocate when it suits them. Therefore, the employment generated is temporary. Whereas family businesses often have a history from the area, they live and invest in the area, and they will contribute to the upholding of the local services.

With regard to this, representatives from the Department of Agriculture shared information on the law currently being developed, “Law on the Protection of Family Farming” (*Ley de protección de la agricultura familiar*). The intention with the law is to define what is meant by a family farm, in order to be able to direct the public initiatives and funds towards these farms. Hence, macro farms can continue to exist, but from the public policy side, it will be easier to direct the efforts towards those considered to be most in need, or more

interesting to support to obtain other policy goals, such as that of contributing to decreasing the rate of depopulation of rural areas. In this sense the Department of Agriculture in Aragón is also working on the redefinition of the management process of the agricultural heritage. Currently, the property of the agricultural land is distributed between new applicants through a public consultation. The Department of Agriculture in Aragón is proposing a radical change. The land will be leased for 25 years, instead of transferring ownership and young entrants will be prioritised.

1.2.4 Key research gaps

The MAP members have also provided input with regard to the areas where additional research could be beneficial in order to stimulate further diversification of rural areas.

More pragmatism in the research agenda for rural areas. There is a general consensus among MAP members that the most important research gap is the transfer of the research being undertaken to real life. Researchers need to bear in mind the utility for the society of the research being undertaken. Thus, more pragmatism in the definition of research agendas, as well as more effort dedicated to how to make research more transferable was considered highly desirable. For this, it was considered that a basic rule should be that rural actors should be consulted when research is being done about rural areas.

In addition, the importance of having **public-private partnerships** in the research projects being undertaken was underlined, as this was considered the best way to make sure that the impacts from the research last.

With regard to concrete topics, the following **research gaps** were identified by the MAP members:

1. EU research on rural development, what are the factors of success or failure of distinctive types of rural areas? It would help to create models to have something to replicate or take ideas from.
2. Additional environmental research was considered highly desirable, as an area that strongly affects quality of life in rural areas. For example:
 - a. Research projects aiming at making bioeconomy more concrete. The EU bioeconomy strategy is considered too general to be practical, regional/local authorities need examples to make bioeconomy more tangible, what can bioeconomy bring to rural areas?
 - b. Valorisation of environmental services in rural areas – closely linked to the objective of developing rural areas. Does preserving a minimum level of population in rural areas bring environmental benefits, and if so, should society pay for it? An attempt at quantifying this would be desirable.
3. Digitalisation. What role can digitalisation bring to rural areas? An attempt at quantifying this would be desirable.
4. Female entrepreneurship in rural areas.
5. Demand and supply of the labour market in rural areas related to young people and link to education/training.
6. Additional social research related to, for example:
 - a. The employed part of the population living in poor conditions, including labour conditions. Research investigating how this impacts the development of rural areas and potential recommendations/solutions.
 - b. Detect problems and necessities of citizens in rural areas. Based on differentiated typologies. To enable a better focus of the policies targeting rural areas.

- c. Also additional research related to other social sciences such as geography and history was considered important, as currently much focus is on technology and big data, whereby the social sciences are forgotten.

7. Practical research: what do entrepreneurs need in different rural areas?

Recommendations and Conclusions

The main conclusions from the second MAP cycle in Aragón are that efforts to diversify the rural economy will only be fruitful if the general living conditions and standards are in place, such as housing, communication, and services. Without adequate general living conditions, people will continue to emigrate from rural areas regardless of the efforts made to generate work opportunities. Furthermore, in order to diversify the rural economy, sectoral approaches will only be partially effective. Instead, a comprehensive and horizontal strategy is needed, incorporating all sectors and themes, and this strategy should be the foundation for coordinated actions undertaken by all actors involved.

Based on this, the main recommendations and lessons learnt for local/regional/national and EU level policy are the following:

- The development of a coherent national approach towards the diversification of the rural economy, with common objectives. This strategy has to go beyond sectorial approaches and take into consideration all aspects of life and of the economy. It has to be coordinated, both vertically and horizontally. And it has to be followed-up upon in all laws and policies being developed, for all policy areas, through for example a form of “rural proofing” being undertaken of all initiatives being developed by the government. This may be best done through the setting-up of a government agency with the responsibility for rural development. Improved confidence among the different administrations and to maintain the decision-making beyond electoral cycles is key to implement this recommendation.
- This national strategy then has to be reflected upon in a regional strategy, abiding by the same requirements in relation to coordination and horizontal approach as the national strategy. (As discussed above, it should be noted that the region of Aragón is currently in the process of developing a law in relation to the “Dynamisation of rural Aragón”.)
- Once this is in place, and all policy actors are in agreement, the common goals have to be implemented through all policies at hand, and should be the guiding principle for all actions undertaken. This will require that also all policies implemented regionally are undergoing a “rural proofing” check. This would have high-level implications for all policy decisions related to for example: education, housing, transports, science, energy, as well as the distribution of the CAP support. In general, it is considered that supporting family businesses over multi-national businesses has greater possibilities of maintaining population in rural areas, and should as such be a favoured option which imbues all policy decision.
- On a practical level, in order to favour rural entrepreneurship, this may for example imply:
 - The setting-up of a “one-stop shop” for all rural entrepreneurs, where all administrative procedures can be resolved at one place, and where entrepreneurs can also receive advice in relation to their business.
 - Increased coordination (and potentially steering) of the activities undertaken by the LAGs, or the implementation of certain policy measures through a top-down approach (M6 and M7 of the RDP) rather than through the bottom-up approach (M19).
- To favour housing transactions, two recommendations were proposed:

- To motivate the owners to sell the usufruct rights to the local authority that afterwards rehabilitate and rent the houses. To this end, develop a proper legal framework and training of planning in local governments is needed.
- To create “building management boards” to manage abandoned buildings at local level. The management board should define the incentives for owners to sell their properties safely.

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Appendix

Table 1 Compilation of noteworthy projects / initiatives / tools / methods implemented

Name	Description/Time of implementation	Contact & Internet address
Matarrania	Produces organic cosmetics from olive oil	matarrania.com
El Ababol	Produces artisan marmalades	elababol.com
Emprender en el pueblo	Project providing support and help to entrepreneurs in rural areas, including related to housing, health and education	www.emprenderenelpueblo.com
ARTmosfera	Artistic project based in the desert of Monegros, have created a platform for rural female artists	Mujeresartistasrurales.es
Biofrutal Sport	Produces organic fruit-based snacks for athletes	www.biofrutal.com
Carnísima	Produces and sells organic meat online	Carnisima.com
El vino del Desierto	Wine production and wine tourism in the desert	Elvinodeldesierto.com
Jalea de Luz	Produces crude honey and other products (cosmetics, candles, propoleo) stemming from bees	jaleadeluz.com
Patata de Chia	Recuperation and production of a rare variety of potatoes, with quality certification	Patatadechia.es
Gardeniers	Social-organic project that combines organic production with gardening and employs staff with disabilities	Gardeniers.es
Fábrica de escabechados	Adding value to meat products (through pickled production)	https://www.laurelytomillo.es/nosotros-escabechados-laurel-y-tomillo/
Hotel Tierra Buxo	Boutique hotel with quality dining in the village of Arcusa (Huesca)	www.hoteltierrabuxo.com/
Residencia Romanos Campo	Residency for elderly in the village of Campomanos	residenciacamporomanos.com
Biela y Tierra	Project for increasing consciousness around sustainable production and consumption, with the aim of maintaining lively rural areas	Bielaytierra.com



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SHERPA has received funding from the European Union's Horizon 2020 Research and Innovation Programme under Grant Agreement No. 862448. The content of the document does not reflect the official opinion of the European Union. Responsibility for the information and views expressed therein lies entirely with the author(s).