



SHERPA
Rural Science-Society-Policy
Interfaces

MAP Position Note

EMPOWERING RURAL AREAS IN MULTI-LEVEL GOVERNANCE PROCESSES



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).

EMPOWERING RURAL AREAS IN MULTI-LEVEL GOVERNANCE PROCESSES

MAP POSITION NOTE

IDRA, INNOVACIÓN EN DESARROLLO RURAL DE ARAGÓN (SPAIN)

Version 31.03.2023

Authors: Bárbara Soriano, Isabel Bardají and Carina Folkesson

Contributors: Jesús Nogués, Paco Domínguez, José Manuel Salvador, Javier Blasco Fernández, María Quílez López, Silvia Benedi, Esther Castrejón, Luis Antonio Sáez Pérez, Vicente Pinilla, José María Sumpsi.

Citation: *Soriano, B., Bardají, I., Folkesson, C. (2023). Empowering Rural Areas in Multi-Level Governance Processes, MAP Position Note IDRA, Innovación En Desarrollo Rural De Aragón (Spain). 10.5281/zenodo.8240293*

Table of Content

1. Current situation based on background research and evidence.....	3
2. Position of the Multi-Actor Platform.....	4
2.1. Identified strengths and needs	4
2.2. Existing interventions and actions	5
2.3. Recommendations from the MAP	7
2.3.1 Recommendations for future rural policies	7
2.3.2 Recommendations for future research agendas	7
3. Conclusions	9
Acknowledgements	10
References.....	10
Annex 1 Methodology used by the MAP.....	11

1. Current situation based on background research and evidence

Aragón is an autonomous region governed by Aragonese government with its own competences that directly report to the Spanish central government. Aragonese government is regulated by Aragon Autonomy Statute (Ley Orgánica 5/2007)¹ and its structure is divided into 10 departments: 1) Agriculture, Livestock and natural environment; 2) Science, University and Knowledge; 3) Civil society and Social rights; 4) Economy, Planification and Employment; 5) Education, Culture and Sports; 6) Tax and public administration; 7) Industry, Competitiveness and business development; 8) Presidency and institutional relationships; 9) Health; and 10) Territorial integration, mobility and housing.

Aragón's government counts on **three administrative layers** across rural areas. The first layer is the **province**. The Aragonese territory is divided into three provinces, Huesca, Zaragoza and Teruel, and each province has its own **Provincial council**. In turn, provinces are divided into 33 **counties** (second administrative layer) that are governed by their corresponding **County council**: 13 in Zaragoza, 10 in Huesca and 10 in Teruel. Finally, counties group a total of 731 **municipalities** governed by **mayors**: 293 in Zaragoza, 202 in Huesca and 236 in Teruel. Each administrative layer has its own competences. Provincial council is responsible of coordination and guarantee comprehensive and adequate provision in the entire provincial territory of municipal services and participate in the coordination with Aragonese and Central Government. It also provides legal, economic and technical assistance to counties, especially those with less economic and management capacity and cooperates in the promotion of economic and social development and planning in the provincial territory. County council manages a wide diverse range of competences, playing a relevant role in rural areas. Competences embrace from land use planning and urban planning, transportation, urban waste and treatment, to public health, social action and tourism, among other. Indeed, Aragonese government and provincial councils may delegate the exercise of their competences to the county councils. County councils also have the competence (with no enforcement) of designing rural development plan at county level (Gobierno de Aragón, 2010, 2021). The municipal mayor has local-oriented competences such as urban planning, protection and management of historical heritage, housing, urban environment (parks, gardens..), water access and sanitation, roads infrastructure, social emergencies, social activities and promotion the use of information and communication technologies among citizens.

In addition to public administration, civil society also plays a role in the governance of rural areas in Aragón, through the non-profit Association "The Aragonese Federation of Municipalities, Regions and Provinces (FAMCP)² "that embraces the different local administrative layers (provincial, counties and local town councils) of the Aragonese Government. FAMCP provides training courses, conferences and seminars aimed at either public officials or local administration personnel to improve the attention to the citizens in the region.

Finally, there are 20 Local Action Groups (LAGs)³ in Aragón funded by programme LEADER, which are one of the main actors promoting activities and providing services in rural areas. According to Andres et al., (2021) LEADER programme is key feature for multilevel governance for territorial development and the empowerment of local actors. Territorial organization of the LAGs do not follow the governmental administrative structure explained above. There are some LAGs that cover one or more counties and LAGs that embrace a group of local towns that belong to different counties and provinces. Unlike county councils, LAGs have the competence and are enforced to elaborate a strategic rural development plan for their

1 <https://www.boe.es/buscar/act.php?id=BOE-A-2007-8444>

2 <http://www.dpz.es/areas/area-de-asistencia-y-modernizacion-local/asistencia-a-municipios/actividades-formativas/formacion-FAMCP#:~:text=La%20Federaci%C3%B3n%20Aragonesa%20de%20Municipios,los%20entes%20dependientes%20de%20estas.>

3 <https://aragonrural.org/grupos-leader/>

corresponding region (under Common Agricultural Policy programming), that is reported to the Aragonese Government. LAGs are coordinated by the Aragonese Rural Development Network⁴.

2. Position of the Multi-Actor Platform

2.1. Identified strengths and needs

Discussion with MAP members was focused on two specific governance subtopics: Place-based policy-making and Inclusive and Participatory Governance. The key needs identified by MAP members are presented by subtopic.

Place-based policy-making

Needs identified related to horizontal coordination:

- The existing **mechanisms created to facilitate horizontal coordination**, such as the Commissioner for dealing with depopulation (regional level), the Sectorial Conference for demographic challenge (national level) and provincial councils (local level), **are not successful** as they are not accompanied by competences related to budget, nor in relation to the implementation of the corresponding policies.
- **The structure of public administration is hierarchical and organized by sectorial departments.** Objectives, strategies, budget allocations and project' implementation are defined at sectorial department level. This structure hinders coordination between departments. Horizontal coordination should be defined through the whole planning process, from defining objectives to implementing action.
- There are **no clear incentives for strengthening horizontal cooperation.** Furthermore, the need of quick response and short-term impacts demanded by policy cycles prioritize departmental initiatives versus coordinated initiatives that require more time to be put in place, and also often to show measurable results. There is a clear gap between policy short-term timeframe and rural development long-term timeframe.
- As a consequence of the public administration's structure and the lack of cooperation culture, it is common that there is a **lack of trust in the personal relationships between departments** that could enable horizontal cooperation. Exceptional interdepartmental cooperation therefore becomes a result of personal initiatives, rather than being based on institutionalized proceedings.

Needs identified related to vertical coordination:

- There is evidence of the **lack of vertical coordination in rural areas** in Aragón. MAP members provided an example, of many, related to transports initiatives. While at national level there is an initiative to shorten the travelling time by reducing the number of scheduled stops, regional level is implementing a project to ensure rural mobility by increasing the number of scheduled stops, without ensuring the coordination between these two lines.
- The **local administration** is the last link in the vertical coordination chain. This administrative level is **often overwhelmed by workload, and often needs to be trained** to carry out its functions successfully. Therefore, many actions which depend on the local administration to be implemented have a limited success in its implementation, thereby limiting the vertical coordination.
- There is a **lack of alignment between technical and political communication** that limits vertical coordination. Due to this, many initiatives are not successfully implemented, and technicians and policy makers do not what and where the problem took place along vertical coordination.

⁴ <https://aragonrural.org/>

- **Local Action Groups** are key local actors for improving (vertical/horizontal) coordination. However, in order for them to take on a **greater responsibility in relation to coordination**, they would benefit from both greater confidence in their role as coordinators, greater policy competencies, as well as a greater budget allocated to this end.
- There are **discrepancies in the decision-making process between rural and urban stakeholders**. While rural actors mainly prioritize projects that improve rural citizens quality of life in terms of work and economic impacts, urban stakeholders add complementary variables such as environmental impacts in the decision-making. There is a need to define which is the proper level for decision-making and if this level varies according to the topic.
- There is also **a lack of accountability amongst the different administrative stakeholders and a lack of tools measuring the impact** in relation to the implementation of socio-economic coordinated policy actions.

Public participation

- The aptitude for **public participation is closed to exhausted**. Civil society has limited confidence in public consultation processes as they have not seen that their participation has influenced policy design, nor received feedback as to how their participation may have influenced the policy design.
- There is **limited motivation for the younger generation** to participate in public consultations as the younger generations have not been encouraged by the older generations to participate, due to the older generations' disappointment with the process.
- **Public consultations are becoming mere processes**. Organizers neither have enough time to prepare them properly nor have been trained for this purpose, nor to digest the results.

2.2. Existing interventions and actions

Key question to address: What are examples of existing or emerging governance good practice(s) identified by the MAP that have helped address regional and local needs?

Policies already in place taken by local actors are:

The Commissioner for the fight against depopulation⁵: This is an advisory position created in 2018 based on the commitment by the Aragonese Government (as well as other Autonomous Communities in Spain) to reverse the exodus from the countryside to the cities in Aragón. This initiative is framed under the National Strategy against the Demographic Challenge approved in 2017 (Gobierno de España, 2017).

Sectoral Conference for demographic challenge: This is a cooperation body created in 2020 between the Spanish government and the Autonomous Regions to coordinate and cooperate in policies aimed at tackling demographic challenges in Spain and, in particular, depopulation, progressive ageing, and floating population effects (Ministerio para la Transición Ecológica y Reto Demográfico, 2020).

Counties cooperation council: This is a body created in 2002 (RD 345/2002) that seeks to reinforce the relationship and coordination between different administrations, mainly between the local administrations and the Aragonese Government. This body facilitates to implementation of the principles of effectiveness, hierarchy, decentralization and coordination.

Legislation on sustainable development of rural areas (Law 45/2007⁶), that establish measures to favor the achievement of economic, social and environmentally sustainable development of the rural environment at the national level, with concerted actions with the Autonomous Communities Administrations.

⁵ <https://www.aragon.es/organismos/presidencia-del-gobierno-de-aragon/comisionado-para-la-lucha-contra-la-despoblacion>

⁶ <https://www.boe.es/buscar/act.php?id=BOE-A-2007-21493>

This law was developed by the RD 752/2010⁷ that established the first program of sustainable rural development for the period 2010-2014. This was a useful initiative, but with low impact as it has been difficult to coordinate. This is explained because its implementation required complex bureaucratic procedures, and there were no clear actions, responsibilities, and budgets. Furthermore, a change in the political party in 2011 with a new order of priorities, explained why this law left behind.

It has been recently approved **new competences for the Aragonese Rural Development Network - RADR** (is going to be renamed the Common Agricultural Policy (PAC) network). RADR will provide administrative support to the LAGs (projects administrative management) with the aim at reducing the LAGs administrative burden and reinforcing the rural dynamization and planification that the LAGs used to lead in the territory.

Regarding the initiatives already in place, it is worth mentioning the initiative called “**Open Aragón**”⁸ promoted by the Aragonese Government that seeks to reinforce transparency, open data, volunteering, and public participation. Regarding the latter, Open Aragón mainly provides two instruments: **Public consultations and participatory processes**. There have been organized 23 public consultations related to rural development and environmental protection since 2020, such as public consultation on territorial integration of landscapes in Aragón, public aids for protecting vulnerable areas, or hunting legislation; and 2 participatory processes regarding the definition of the rural dynamization legislation and the design the structure for preventing and extinction of forest fires. Open Aragón initiative also provides information about the existing **legislation at local level to regulate local participation**⁹. Promoting active participation of citizens in public affairs has become an obligation that local governments must comply with under legal system (Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe on December 6, 2001, Organic Law 5/2007, Law 57/2003 and Legislative Decree 1/2006). Within this framework, some local entities have approved regulations for citizen participation to provide legal certainty to the matter and thus adapt to new regulatory trends (Table 1).

Finally, an private initiative launched at national level is the online tool **eAgora**¹⁰ that has been implemented in more than 450 local councils in Spain. This is an **all-in-one platform that connects citizens with the administration**, allowing citizens to participate and interact with their local environment and public services. They facilitate this connection by offering people the best user experience to create cognitive spaces, based on a new model of participatory and inclusive democracy.

Table 1 – Selection of regulations to reinforce citizen public participation at local level.

<p>Barbastro city council citizen participation regulation</p> <p>http://aragonparticipa.aragon.es/sites/default/files/1498_ReglamentoBarbastro_1.pdf</p>
<p>Albarracín (Teruel) city council citizen participation regulation (2008)</p> <p>http://aragonparticipa.aragon.es/sites/default/files/reglamento-albarracin_0.pdf</p>
<p>Cinca Medio county citizen participation regulation (2013)</p> <p>http://aragonparticipa.aragon.es/sites/default/files/1763_REGLAMENTO_PC_CINCA%20MEDIO_1.pdf</p>
<p>Alcorisa (Teruel) city council citizen participation regulation (2008)</p>

⁷ <https://www.boe.es/boe/dias/2010/06/11/pdfs/BOE-A-2010-9237.pdf>

⁸ <https://gobiernoabierto.aragon.es/agoab/>

⁹ <https://gobiernoabierto.aragon.es/agoab/participacion/reglamento>

¹⁰ <https://www.eagora.app/>

http://aragonparticipa.aragon.es/sites/default/files/390_Alcorisa_2.pdf

Pinseque city council citizen participation regulation (2008)

http://aragonparticipa.aragon.es/sites/default/files/395_Pinseque_2.pdf

2.3. Recommendations from the MAP

2.3.1 Recommendations for future rural policies

Recommendations to favor vertical and horizontal coordination:

- It should be made mandatory to consider the strategies of local development designed by the LAGs at a higher administrative level (province, regional), and for the regional/provincial administrations to demonstrate how the local development strategies are being taken into account. Regulation and transparency procedures should be defined to report to what extent the strategies defined by LAGs have been considered in the definition of rural development strategies at regional. Indeed, LAG's strategies are legitimated as they are often ratified by the local mayor as well as counties' representatives as they are members of the LAG's management board.
- Move the policy responsibility of the LAGs from the agricultural department to another department that allows LAGs to coordinate actions across different policy areas. Moving LAGs out of agriculture, including the corresponding budget as well as the budget stemming from a different source than the CAP (multi-fund tools), might facilitate a horizontal coordination across the concerned departments with regard to the implementation of the work of the LAGs.
- Redesign current plan of activities carried out by LAGs, by reducing LAG's administrative burden and selecting the projects implemented. LAGs should focus their activity in those projects that really add value to rural areas (e.g. developing activities to foster conciliation), and leaving behind those that just may require administrative support (e.g. machinery renewal).

Recommendations to reinforce citizens participation:

- To strengthen the feedback process to civil society during and after public consultations. Individual feedback should be a requirement whenever public participation is encouraged, where the extent to which the proposals made have been considered should be explained. And, where the proposals made have not been considered, explain why ideas provided have not been considered.
- Though digital consultation is gaining more and more relevance, it is important to maintain face to face public participation to foster dialogue and confidence in the process.
- Public participation should embrace the whole design process, not just collecting ideas of pre-selected proposals or already written documents.

2.3.2 Recommendations for future research agendas

The recommendations for future agenda are:

- Research on literature review on existing rural government structure and cooperation mechanisms.
- Research on literature review on bottlenecks in vertical (Bottom-up / Top-down policies) and horizontal coordination.
- Research on social impact assessment of public policies, sectorial vs multisectorial approaches.
- Research on the optimal level for decision making in rural areas: Conflicts among citizens' perspectives.

- Research on measuring the quality of the economic growth (happiness economics)
- Research on how to strengthen social capital in rural areas.

3. Conclusions

This position note analyses the needs related to governance in rural areas in Aragón, mainly addressing two main topics: Place-based policy-making and inclusive and participatory governance. This document also reflects the research opportunities and policy recommendations suggested by MAP members to address the identified needs. To this end a combination of methods has been applied, comprising a review of the current situation and ongoing initiatives and the organization of a workshop with MAP members.

The analysis of the structure of the Aragón Government shows a high rate of decentralization, with a multi-layer administrative organization. While this structure allows for public services to operate closer to citizens' needs, it also supposes a challenge for its governance as it requires a clear definition of the competencies of the multi-level councils involved, their complementarity and monitoring, as well as both vertical and horizontal coordination between the various involved bodies.

MAP members recommendations mainly strive at reinforcing the role of the LAGs in vertical and horizontal coordination. Regarding the former, the bottom-up approach in vertical coordination can be improved if it becomes mandatory to take into consideration the local development strategies designed by LAGs, when defining the Aragonese rural development plan. Regarding the latter, a better horizontal coordination could be achieved if LAGs were located in a cross-cutting department of the Aragón Government and could be effectively funded by multi-funds tools. Finally, a reviewed and intense effort needs to be done to reinforce the feedback provided to the citizens participating in public consultations. Research opportunities identified by MAP members are mainly oriented to a literature review of existing government structures and coordination mechanisms, bottlenecks and opportunities.

Acknowledgements

We acknowledge the participation in this position paper of Jesús Nogués, Paco Dominguez, José Manuel Salvador, Javier Blasco Fernández, María Quílez López, Silvia Benedi, Esther Castrejón, Luis Antonio Sáez Pérez, Vicente Pinilla, José María Sumpsi, and the SHERPA project.

References

Andres, A. S., Navarro, M. L. H., & Barthe, L. (2021). La gobernanza multinivel como elemento clave dentro del programa LEADER para el desarrollo territorial y el empoderamiento de los actores locales: Los casos de Aragón y Midi-Pyrénées. *Cuadernos geográficos de la Universidad de Granada*, 60(3), 192-211. <https://dialnet.unirioja.es/servlet/articulo?codigo=8246110>

Gobierno de Aragón (2010). Plan comarcal de desarrollo rural sostenible de la comarca de Hoya de Huesca/Plana de Uesca. Informe de sostenibilidad ambiental. https://www.aragon.es/documents/20127/674325/ISA_HOYA_DE_HUESCA.pdf/03dec599-b120-5dbc-adb1-39bcbea542bb

Gobierno de Aragón (2021). Plan estratégico de desarrollo rural, patrimonial y turístico de la comarca de Sobrarbe. https://www.sobrarbe.com/descargas/plan_estrategico_sobrarbe.pdf

Gobierno de España (2017). Estrategia Nacional frente al reto demográfico. Directrices generales. https://mpt.gob.es/dam/es/portal/prensa/archivo_grafico/galerias/2019/Marzo/20190328_OEP2019/directrices_estrategia.pdf.pdf

Ministerio para la Transición Ecológica y Reto Demográfico (2020). Reglamento interno de la conferencia sectorial de reto demográfico. https://mpt.gob.es/dam/es/portal/politica-territorial/autonomica/coop_autonomica/Conf_Sectoriales/Conf_Sect_Regl/parrafo/0/R_CS_R_DEMOGRAFI_CO_23-07-20.pdf.pdf

Annex 1 Methodology used by the MAP

The workshop was held in Zaragoza the 28th February 2023. Ten MAP members attended the workshop representing research (3), society (3) and policy (3). The workshop was conducted by 3 members of the UPM team. No information was anticipated before the meeting.

The workshop was successfully carried out. The workshop lasted four hours and it was structured as follows:

- Introduction: Presentation of governance concept and current challenges.
- Identification of governance needs in rural areas in Aragón.
- Definition of policy proposals to improve meeting the identified needs. Identify concrete actions and responsible actors. Discussion.
- Definition of research proposals to support overcoming the identified needs. Discussion.

