

IMMIGRATION AND LOCAL ENDOGENOUS DEVELOPMENT IN RURAL AREAS: A Comparative Study of Two Left-Behind Spanish Regions

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Objectives

- ④ **Rural areas in Spain face depopulation and ageing**, weakening local economies and increasing their vulnerability to social and environmental risks. This creates a **Catch-22**: older populations cannot sustain past activities, but new ones do not emerge due to youth emigration.
- ④ The presentation studies **connections between entrepreneurship and immigration** in rural economies, offering insights into sustainability, resilience, and the potential of newcomers to reinvigorate the social fabric in two left-behind Spanish regions. Specifically, it analyses the reasons why immigrant businesses might be successful in left-behind areas (i.e., through their social and human capital).
- ④ As a bottom line, it explores which are the factors that explain **differences** between two left-behind regions concerning **local development in rural Spain**.

Theoretical background

- ④ **Mobility and migration.** Traditional rural–urban flows (“counter-urbanization”) in Spain have shifted, giving rise to international migration into rural areas, not only for labour (e.g. farming, caregiving) but also retirement and lifestyle motives. Immigrants today engage in construction, tourism, care services, and entrepreneurship—key to diversifying local economies (*Rye & Scott, 2018; Mendoza et al., 2024*).
- ④ **Rural studies:** While migration has reversed depopulation trends in some regions, comparative rural studies remain scarce, and international immigrants are often undervalued as drivers of local development (*Bayona-i-Carrasco & Gil-Alonso, 2013; Mendoza, 2023*).
- ④ **Neo-endogenous development:** Builds on local capacities (endogenous) but adds external linkages and networking as drivers of sustainable development (*Ray, 2006; Ploeg & Marsden, 2008; Gkartzios & Lowe, 2019*).
- ④ **The "Left-Behind" paradigm:** Increasingly used to explain inequalities in border/rural Europe. Immigration offers opportunities, but outcomes depend on local governance, institutional frameworks, and economic diversification (*Mendoza & Domínguez-Mujica, 2025*).

Study areas

This study compares two **left-behind areas** with contrasting economic structures and distinct population dynamics: Ribagorza, in the Spanish Pyrenees, and Sayago, along the Spanish–Portuguese border.

The research aligns with the objectives of the RE-PLACE project (Horizon Europe Framework Programme) and ELDEMOR (funded by the Spanish government).

SPAIN



Research design

MIXED-METHODS APPROACH

Quantitative data:

- Analysis Census and official statistics.

Qualitative data:

- 30 in-depth interviews with immigrants (*15 per region*).
- Key informant interviews: local mayors, business leaders, development agents.
- Snowball sampling; diverse age groups and nationalities.

Analytical Framework

Interviews analysed
through content analysis
using MAXQDA
Codes: *reasons for
migration,
entrepreneurship, local
networks, governance*

Demographic divergence: Two rural realities

	Ribagorza	Sayago	Spain
Population 2001	11,792	9,775	40,847,371
Population 2011	13,036	8,593	46,815,916
Population 2021	12,422	6,986	47,400,798
Annual growth rate 01-11 (%)	1.0	-1.3	1.4
Annual growth rate 11-21 (%)	-0.3	-2.1	0.1
% Aged 65 and more (2021)	23.4	40.4	17.3
% Foreign population (2021)	13.3	4.2	13.5

- ⊗ **The extreme ageing of Sayago** (40.4% of the population aged 65 or over).
- ⊗ **Partial population recovery in Ribagorza**, largely driven by international immigration.
- ⊗ **Low proportion of foreign residents in Sayago**, well below the national average.

Immigrants profiles

④ Retirees

Primarily from Northern and Central Europe, attracted by the mild climate, idyllic landscapes, and relaxed lifestyle.

④ Entrepreneurs

Professionals, business owners, and self-employed workers who contribute to local economies through their skills and international networks.

④ Agricultural workers

Mainly from developing countries, meeting the demand for labour in farming and related activities.

④ Caregivers

Immigrants providing care for ageing populations in rural areas with limited services.

Immigrants, entrepreneurship and local development

- ④ In both Ribagorza and Sayago, immigrants engage in small-scale entrepreneurial activities, typically as self-employed workers or family-run businesses.
- ④ In **Ribagorza**, immigrants have revitalised local economies through:
 - Tourism-related services (e.g. rural lodges, rafting, nature-based experiences).
 - Transnational/local business networks, attracting visitors and clients from abroad.
- ④ In **Sayago**, initiatives are more limited but include:
 - Local farm production (e.g. wine and cheese routes).
 - National/local business networks (e.g. wine and cheese routes).
- ④ Businesses sometimes rely on household incomes and savings for survival.

Immigrants, entrepreneurship and local development

Restaurant and travel agency
(Ribagorza)



Wine route
(Sayago)



Immigrants, entrepreneurship and local development



- ④ *We ended up here because a Dutch couple already living here needed someone to look after their bed and breakfast, and **we fell in love with the place.** We spotted an opportunity to rent the old, empty school building, so we decided to open a travel agency and a restaurant/bar. **Most of our clients are Dutch tourists,** and we design custom trips just for them. We know all the local businesses, so whether someone wants to visit cheese factories or try parachuting, we take care of everything (Female Dutch, 53, Ribagorza)*
- ④ *A group of us entrepreneurs in Sayago came up with this idea. **We put together a route featuring local products—cheese, crafts, wineries, restaurants—**you name it. We took inspiration from the local Arribes wine designation and called it a “wine route,” even though we’ve got all sorts of businesses involved. A designer from Madrid living here created the tile-style logo, and you’ll see it displayed on the front doors of all participating businesses. **Funny enough, most of us aren’t originally from the area!** (Female Irish, 56, Sayago)*

Immigrants' capitals and local development



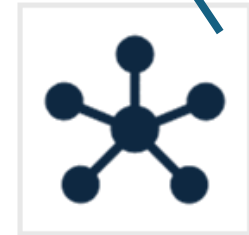
Human capital

Skills, experience, and knowledge that immigrants contribute to local entrepreneurship.



Local-based capital

Trust-based social networks that facilitate knowledge and exchange.



External connections

Links to international markets and networks that open up new opportunities.

Social capital

Immigrants, well-being and local development

- ④ Entrepreneurial immigrants often combine economic activity with social engagement, helping restore services, activate abandoned spaces, and foster a renewed sense of place.
- ④ *We have a vibrant collaboration with Graus (Ribagorza's capital). We actively participated in the local theatre festival (...) **In our home, we have an outdoor theatre, and presently, we are refurbishing an old cellar to create a more intimate setting—an indoor theatre for around 30 people (...)** It's truly charming: from the outdoor theatre, there's a delightful view of the mountains. People appreciate it (...) **We organized workshops for children (...)** Our intention is not to isolate ourselves from the community. **We established an association to cultivate stronger connections with the locals.** Even elderly residents living downhill have made the journey up to attend our performances (Brazilian female, 62, Ribagorza)*

Local governance as a development catalyst

Ribagorza

- Has implemented local policies within a structured political framework, supported by the regional government.
- Actively involved in a nursing training programme for elderly care, addressing the needs of its ageing population.
- Local development groups in charge of channelling EU funds to underdeveloped areas have been particularly active.

Sayago

- Lacks structured support and relies more on isolated local initiatives.
- Has limited capacity to implement coordinated development programmes.
- Shows weaker presence of effective local development groups for securing and managing European funds.

Conclusions

- ④ **International immigration** are key actors in **rural revitalisation**, but its impact is **uneven** and heavily depends on **local conditions**.
- ④ **Immigrant entrepreneurship** fosters **economic diversification**, mainly in **farming** and **tourism-related services**.
- ④ **Neo-endogenous development** is a useful framework to understand how **external** and **local forces** interact in left-behind areas.
- ④ **Local governance plays a critical role:**
 - Structured institutions (as in Ribagorza) enhance coordination and innovation.
 - Weaker frameworks (as in Sayago) limit the effectiveness of development efforts.
- ④ **Policy implication:** A one-size-fits-all strategy will fail. Place-based, flexible approaches are needed to unlock the development potential of rural areas through migration.

- ④ **Thank you for your attention.**
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