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Inspire Policy Making with Territorial Evidence

## UPTAKE ARTICLE

# ESPON Peer Learning Workshop: Understanding Green Infrastructure and Shrinking rural areas

Virtual

24th February 2022, 09:30-12:30 (CET)



## Objective



The ESPON-TNO programme organised a virtual Peer Learning Workshop with ESPON researchers, academics and Spanish stakeholders on the 24th of February 2022.

The topic was of particular interest for Spain in order to find the ways of operationalising Green Infrastructure (GI) as a tool for new development plans both in urban and rural areas, with particular reference to shrinking rural areas.

The current beginning of next programming period as well as the implementation of the National Recovery Plan under Next Generation EU provides an opportunity to rethink the development strategies for Spain, fully integrating the territorial dimension with the elaboration of new regional development plans facing sustainability issues as well as demographic decline. This issue was faced by the Spanish National Strategy for the Demographic Challenge. The multidisciplinary approach aimed to cope with climate change effects on the most vulnerable groups and geographical areas. Furthermore, rural areas and depopulated Spain could find profitable opportunities to be developed in ecological transition policy.

Thus, the general goal of the event was to generate a debate among policymakers on the potential role of GI in elaborating regional development plans for shrinking rural areas in the context of climate change policy requirements. The workshop's objective was to show and discuss how ESPON knowledge can both inform and inspire the development of national policy instruments and to consider how national and regional stakeholders can make (better) use of trans-European knowledge and case studies from other countries.

Out of the 176 registrations, an average of 90 participants from 27 member states attended the event. The largest proportions of attendees were from Spain, Poland and Portugal. The people registered belonged to three groups: public servants (50%), academics (26,5%), or professionals (22%). Overall, the event has proven to be successful with a high level of satisfaction.

## Summary

The event began with welcome words by **Wiktor Szydarowski** (Director of ESPON EGTC) focusing on the role of the ESPON programme in policymaking with particular reference to Spanish context. Szydarowski also highlighted the fruitful participation of Spanish research institutes to ESPON activities. As an enhancement of the ESPON legacy, the formula of a Peer Learning workshop (PLW) allowed for a free flow of ideas and good practices for promoting a wider practical use of ESPON research outputs and knowledge transfer.

**Michaela Gensheimer** (Senior Project Expert - ESPON EGTC) gave a useful synthesis of insights provided by two ESPON projects closely related to the issues discussed in the PLW. The first was the ESPON ESCAPE project (European Shrinking Rural Areas: Challenges, Actions and Perspectives for Territorial Governance) focusing on European rural regions experiencing, or threatened by, demographic decline and governance options for these regions.

In the last two decades, the phenomenon of rural shrinkage has become visible across Europe, which can also be seen in the contestation and political discontent that have been registered, particularly in marginal areas.

However, there has also been a growing awareness of the development potential of these areas. For example, recently in relation to the dynamics triggered by the pandemic and connected to the processes of digitalisation and smart working.

Analysing the phenomenon from the mid-1990s to the present day with projections to 2033, we see that about 59% of the EU28 regions classified as predominantly rural and intermediate are shrinking. However, the reasons for this are diverse and the project provides a typology of complex shrinkage by identifying categories with respect to economic and migration dynamics and population structure (shrinking legacy).

The second project that can provide elements to the discussion is ESPON GRETA (Green infrastructure: Enhancing biodiversity and ecosystem services for territorial development) which explores the potential of

Green Infrastructures in spatial planning to support the ‘design’ of a coherent development plan that will enhance the role of ecosystem services.

It is important to underline the various benefits that the implementation of GI can provide to different sectors and at different levels, particularly the role that GI in rural areas can play in climate change mitigation and adaptation policies (e.g. in the pursuit of climate neutrality) to be implemented in the coming years. Particularly useful among the project results is the identification of factors that may limit or support GI development.

The introduction was concluded by **Juana Lopez Pagan** General Director of Policies against Depopulation within the Spanish Ministry of Ecological Transition, who underlined the value and usefulness of the PLW for the work that the Spanish Government is conducting to contrast depopulation. Lopez Pagan thanked ESPON for this. Such an event makes the exchange of experiences between academics and policymakers possible. Furthermore, reflecting on the European context allows stakeholders to think about possible solutions to a problem that sees its interpretation vary according to different contexts and political landscapes. The different territories that are in the process of shrinkage can use GI to trigger resilient transformation processes. This event is useful for the work of elaborating forest management and economic development strategies with regional governments. It is about applying an integrated working logic in the ecological transition dynamic that the Ministry are undertaking. Biodiversity development and rural development must go hand in hand and be in balance.

**The first session** was moderated by **Maria Prezioso** (University of Rome Tor Vergata and ECP Italy) and included two extensive presentations of GRETA and ESCAPE project.

The first presentation was by **Gemma Garcia-Blanco** (TECNALIA) who is the lead partner of GRETA project. The project, building on the EU foundations of GI concept as “strategically planned network that delivers a wide range of ecosystem services”, provided wide references on the ways the GI concept has been included in the ESPON countries. It also included an overview of benefits and side effects of GI at different scales from an economic social and environmental point of view and useful review of existing economic evaluation studies. The innovative spatial analysis of GRETA combined a physical mapping of GI elements (“Hubs” formed by formally protected areas and “Connectors” which are natural and semi-natural links) with an ecosystem services mapping following a multifunctional approach. The Valencia case study shows the development of this approach in multiscale context. It also shows the implication for the rural, urban, and border areas as well as the role of GI in spatial planning framework at regional, metropolitan, and municipal level.

**Adrián Ferrandis Martínez** and **Mar Ortega** (from University of Valencia, Department of Geography) illustrated the findings of the ESCAPE project on European Shrinking Rural Areas, focusing on Spanish case of Alt Maestrat, in Castellón region. Shrinkage is predominantly triggered in the northern and southern countries by the combination of geographical position of rural areas and long-term spatial processes. The interlinked dimensions of rural disadvantages have been detected throughout the project case studies, highlighting spatial/ locational components and a spatial components. Among the former are the traditional aspects of peripheral locations and remoteness, the shadowing effect, and the intensive attraction of existing agglomerations as well as the lack of accessibility. Among the latter, weak social relations (social capital, business networks, embeddedness/civil society) and poor global-local linkages and institutional networks. The other components are economic (debt crisis effect, vulnerable local economies) policy-related (negative effect of urban growth policy), and demographic/social (legacy of intensive periods of rural-urban migration with lack of human and social capital). The presentation also demonstrated governance and policy in the Spanish context and some useful considerations on complementarity and opportunity of Integral Promotion of Green Infrastructure and Rural Development Policies.

**The second session** was moderated by **Tom Goosse** (AMRP-UGent) and aimed to give insight on the operationalisation of GI as tools to react to shrinkage. The first presentation focused on the ecosystem services role in the sustainable rural development. **Jaume Fons-Esteve** (Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona) provided clarification on the ways to integrate GI in territorial development focusing on ecosystem service interactions (synergies or trade-offs). Successful GI planning needs to consider implementation across policy areas and cross-scale collaboration, as well as the involvement of multiple stakeholders. The main challenges are in transport, boundary issues, demographic pressure, agriculture, and non-sustainable forest management and forest drainage. From an economic perspective, there is a potential for job creation however, it is not always easy to exploit and external funds are often needed to start the process.

On this issue, **David Meredith** (Research Officer TEAGASC Ireland, Rural Economy Development Programme) talked about The challenge of funds: the Just Transition and EU Policy. Implications of the Green Deal for Rural Regions explaining the European development options for Rural Areas in relation with the present policy context. The challenge here is one of adapting existing policy frameworks and associated governance structures to support transitions that are not only environmentally, economically, and socially reliable but also spatially just. The design and governance of market based systems needs careful consideration to ensure that communities in these places gain from the development of this service. It is necessary to pay attention to resource and capacity issues that may prevent the benefits being realised in rural regions. Member States need to develop measures that can be implemented by rural communities that generate community wealth. These measures have to be developed by multi-actor, participatory approaches (not limited to consultation) in order to ensure that they are appropriate to rural areas and that rural communities have the capacity to implement them.

The concluding speech by **Joaquin Farinos** (University of Valencia) provided a framework to understand the role of GI as a transversal concept covering the present transition issues in a new spatial planning vision.

In this context, GI is a structural component of the territorial heritage system and in that role must be enhanced and inserted in integrated/comprehensive spatial planning.

The challenges of this task have been carefully discussed: from the node of shared definition of GI “areas” and its inclusion in planning tools, to the evaluation of ecosystem services in a multifunctional approach, and to the issue of the legal status of protection for different components.

**The final session** conclusions were moderated by **Jorge Luis Vega Valle**, - ESPON MC -Spain (Ministerio para la Transición Ecológica y el Reto Demográfico). Vega Valle gave the floor to Spanish stakeholders responsible at different levels of policy elaboration and strategy implementation to reflect on the evidence presented. The first panellist was **M<sup>a</sup> Montserrat Castán Arnal** (Mayor of the municipality of Ansó (Huesca)) who described the initiatives developed for facing demographic decline in the framework of a full enhancement of natural heritage following a “smart village” approach. The adopted strategy and some details on fostering entrepreneurship, housing recovery, better connectivity, and energy transition investment have been provided. Regarding the role of ecosystem services, it would be appropriate for rural areas, such as the Huesca region, to evaluate compensation for sustainable management of natural resources (for example for CO<sub>2</sub> capture by sustainable forest maintenance). This could provide a source of job opportunities and investments.

The second speaker was **Jaime Izquierdo Vallina** – expert on rural development and current Commissioner for the Demographic Challenge at Principado de Asturias. This region has the oldest population in Spain, its historical development is based on coal extraction and steel industry and the region can rely on very extensive natural heritage. In elaborating a recovery strategy, the concept of GI was criticised both for the use of term “infrastructure” and the green label. It would be better to refer to nature and the structures that are related to it and to understand the role of the farmer’s culture in shaping the European landscape. The same concept of “smart villages” seems to forget the knowledge inherited by traditional villages in managing natural resources. Considering current and past systems for GI is not only useful to improve the present situation but is also useful in preparing our environment for the future. We need another vision which substitutes protection with ecological reactivation and informs “nature conservation” policy. We need a new economy to manage our rural spaces.

Finally **Fernando Valladares Ros** (Researcher at CSIC -MNCN) addressed some elements of the discussion and highlighted that the concept of GI was used in very different initiatives across Europe, often applied in opportunistic ways to grasp funding opportunities. It is important to evaluate the effects of GI implementation on the real connectivity of ecosystems (e.g. on the fauna) including the social dimension directly affecting the real life of citizens. The concept of multi-functionality is important but the problem of establishing priorities remains. We have to take advantage of the existing knowledge about land uses and ecological approaches in spatial planning but we also need to go from the theories to implementation after evaluating the real experience of funded projects within the framework of GI, focusing on the failures.

**Tom Goose** (Ghent University) closed the event by highlighting some key elements of the discussion.

## Main discussion

An assessment of how the EU countries implemented their GI strategy provides knowledge on the policy areas where GI principles are mainstreamed: land use and spatial development planning; agriculture, forestry and fisheries; and rural development. This suggests that GI is perceived as broader than biodiversity protection, which is what the European GI Strategy from 2013 intended.

Finance, health, and social services are sectors where GI principles are not prominent. The question arises whether we should try to introduce GI principles in these areas or whether we should focus on the implementation of policy areas in which they are already included.

The indicators used in the GRETA project serve to make a standardised comparison of how the different elements of GI are able to provide various ecosystem services and at the same time are able to contribute to different policy objectives, specifically: biodiversity; climate change and risk reduction; and water management. It is thus possible to map demand and supply of flood regulation; soil erosion, water purification; and recreation.

In this way, we obtain an assessment of the capacity of mapped GI to apply to different ecosystems across Europe but the methodology is only applicable locally when using local data sets.

Where is the dominant pattern of interactions between ecosystem services? We can see the synergies between ecosystem services and also the potential trade-off in delivering them, so the planning stage has to pay attention to overcome potential constraints and negative side effects.

Regarding the shrinking phenomenon, over the last two decades urban development supported by EU growth policies has accelerated rural decline across Europe, especially in rural peripheries where the exodus from rural to urban areas and progressive ageing have resulted in an irreversible demographic and general decline.

The decline of rural areas in Central and Eastern Europe appears somewhat different from that of the peripheries in the North and South caused by the disruptions of the “systematic changes”. Some of these changes are caused by the communist regimes in the 1950s and 1960s and by the “liberated” Member States after the collapse of state socialism after 1990; systematic changes aimed at deliberately disrupting existing economic and social structures. The resulting disruptions and discontinuities, weak rural economies and ruined structures of rural societies, contribute to the irreversibility of rural decline and make declining regions in transition countries more vulnerable to dependency and marginalisation than their counterparts in southern and northern Europe.

The multi-factorial causes of population decline require coordinated and holistic integrated responses (social, economic, services, models) that take into account this complexity.

Considering Spanish policies at a national and regional level, the creation of departments, commissioners and strategies shows that the demographic challenge is starting to become a priority on policy agendas, although it is too early to assess its real impact.

Regarding policies at the local level the creation of a “Mancomunidad” (a bottom-up initiative favoured by the existing legal context) has improved the viability and financial sustainability of the provision of Services of General Interest (SGEI) by allowing for the broadening of its scope of action, while remaining close to the citizens.

In general, policy responses echo a social demand from civil society on the issue of depopulation and the issue of “empty Spain” (España vacía). The Spanish case studies allowed policy makers to identify needs at the national and local level.

At all levels, and from different sectors (public, private, civil society), many actors insist on the need for: fiscal differentiation to attract economic activity to rural areas; “rural proofing” to take into account the characteristics and diversity of rural areas in policy and legislation; and counteracting the urban bias “disconnected” from rural realities. Local actors also consider service provision to be one of the main challenges facing rural areas. Regarding the role of European policies in the face of the demographic challenge, the bottom-up tools, LEADER and CLLD, are considered strategic, but with more continuity and integration of local perspectives, capacities, and aspirations (more funding and participatory visioning would be necessary).

It is necessary for policymakers and managers to have a common definition of the problem of population decline in order to delineate areas (at LAU scale) as a first step to implement solutions. In Spain, the average size of the NUTS2 and NUTS3 regions is a major limitation to collect harmonised data with a level of disaggregation that allows for the implementation of effective policies.

Concerning complementarity and opportunities in integrating GI, it is possible to list some considerations in Rural Development Policies.

GI requires the permanence of rural life as a guarantee to avoid the deterioration of the landscape and ecosystems, maintain the natural and cultural heritage, and minimise environmental risks (soil erosion, fires, etc.).

Rural Environments (semi-natural) must also be understood as productive environments (employment results in population fixation). The sectors involved are agriculture and tourism among others. The complementarity between both dynamics and their derived policies create a unique space of opportunity that is worth taking advantage of and adding value to.

## Conclusion

We need to be careful about what we identify as GI when we map it; the indicators we have selected can influence how GI is included in policies and in the spatial planning framework.

What we value positively is the presence of green areas as providers of ecosystem services. The heart of the debate in the third session was precisely on how stakeholders can immediately value the presence of such areas through fundraising and thus gain an economic advantage.

However, this does not always meet the reasons why GI should be preserved and organised and much criticism emerged about the concept of GI itself, especially from local stakeholders.

It is a concept that is born within the current spatial planning framework and needs to be integrated into current policies. As a physical geographer, Tom Goosse points out, the assessment of the ecosystem services that such areas are able to provide is always subject to approximation. It is thus difficult to deliver precise quantified assessments.

Generally speaking, the same landscape assessments can serve the same purposes locally, without necessarily being reduced to a precise quantification.

The focus of the discussion was not so much on the theoretical framework as on the possible measures of implementation and it was emphasised that it is necessary to identify the successful ones, which challenges were faced, which were the failures, and to better analyse these failures. Often in the stakeholders' return of results, the positive aspects emerge and the failures and the analyses of their reasons for failing are neglected.

In the implementation process, the problem of creating incentives, i.e. pursuing a policy through those incentives, is crucial: it is a matter of building fundable projects within a policy process that pursue coherent and identifiable objectives.



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#### **ESPON 2022**

ESPON EGTC  
4 rue Erasme, L-1468 Luxembourg  
Grand Duchy of Luxembourg  
Phone: +352 20 600 280  
Email: [info@espon.eu](mailto:info@espon.eu)  
[www.espon.eu](http://www.espon.eu)

The ESPON EGTC is the Single Beneficiary of the ESPON 2020 Cooperation Programme. The Single Operation within the programme is implemented by the ESPON EGTC and co-financed by the European Regional Development Fund, the EU Member States and the Partner States, Iceland, Liechtenstein, Norway and Switzerland.

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