



Co-financed by the European Regional Development Fund

Inspire Policy Making with Territorial Evidence

## PRE-EVENT BRIEF

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

Virtual

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



## Introduction



As part of its post-2010 biodiversity policy, the European Commission promoted a strategy for an EU-wide Green Infrastructure (GI) initiative with the aim of providing a framework for integrating GI into sectoral policies, including the conservation of nature. The underlying idea of this initiative is the recognition of the environment as an infrastructural resource capable of delivering a wide range of ecosystem services. The integration of GI within European strategies must rely on the backbone of the existing established networks of Protected Areas (PAs) under EU regulation, building on the Natura 2000 network in particular.

According to EU's Green Infrastructure Strategy<sup>1</sup>, GI is “a strategically planned network of natural and semi-natural areas with other environmental features designed and managed to deliver a wide range of ecosystem services. It incorporates green spaces (or blue if aquatic ecosystems are concerned) and other physical features in terrestrial (including coastal) and marine areas. On land, GI is present in rural and urban settings”. The aim is to create solutions to problems of land conservation, ecological and social effects of urban sprawl, and the rapid fragmentation of landscapes.

GI is thus an emerging concept in many European regions where new methods of biodiversity conservation and ecosystem protection are combined with other land-use objectives, such as agriculture, forestry, recreation, mitigating and adapting to climate change, etc. Examples of innovative approaches to effective application of GI at local and regional levels already exist, particularly in terms of methodologies, tools, process management, and implementation of GI solutions in wider contexts.

The benefits provided by GI are divided into environmental, social, and economic benefits both for people and the natural environment. These benefits are scale and context dependent, which means that they vary in importance between urban, peri-urban, and rural areas. In addition, GI aims to be multifunctional in its approach – such that many of these benefits are provided at the same time.

Despite relevant examples of mature spatial planning systems that incorporate a GI approach, there is still great uncertainty in planning practice on how, and at which scales and in which phases of the planning process, to make use of the GI approach. It can also be unclear how best to benefit from the approach's integrative capacity for supporting sustainable development.

In the current transition framework, the role GI can have in shaping regional development plans (particularly in shrinking rural areas) is of interest for policymakers of all levels.

The concept of the ‘shrinking region’ dates back to around twenty years, even though this phenomenon actually goes back many more years. What is essentially new here is that in some cases the phenomenon of depopulation has now come to affect entire regions, including urban areas (‘shrinking cities’).

As already stated more than 10 years ago “*The emergence of demographic decline over entire regions has come on top of – and sometimes merges with – the various problems associated with the disparities in development that traditionally lie at the heart of the European Union's cohesion policy. This should lead to a rethink of this policy area in all its dimensions: economic, social, environmental and, most particularly, territorial. In this context producing a response to the problem of regional decline means putting in place a multiscale system of governance involving levels of intervention that are at the same time supra-regional (European Union and Member States), infra-regional (local authorities and conurbations) and trans-regional (cross-border zones, fringe areas)*”<sup>2</sup>.

1- EC - European Commission (2013). *Green Infrastructure (GI). Enhancing Europe's Natural Capital* Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions, COM(2013)249 final.

2- *Grasland Cl. dir, Shrinking regions/ Régions en déclin: un nouveau paradigme démographique et territorial*, Etude pour le parlement européen, Département thématique B Politiques structurelles et de cohésion, Publication du Parlement européen, 126 p, 2008, 11/07/2008 PE 408-928 ; quotation p. viii

Recently, the Territorial Agenda 2030 highlights the need for regional and local governments to obtain external support to ensure inclusive and sustainable development.

*“Such support can be under EU Cohesion Policy and Rural Development Policy within the Common Agricultural Policy, with objectives and investments in all regions. This is of particular relevance for territories with less prosperous future perspectives, those lagging behind and territories suffering from severe and permanent natural or demographic handicaps” (Consideration n. 11, p.3).[...]*

*“The European Green Deal with its Sustainable Europe Investment Plan and Just Transition Mechanism, as well as related EU sector policies and work on Long-term vision for rural areas, offer the opportunity to promote synergies between the Territorial Agenda and overarching EU strategies and policies. The Green Deal links green and Just Transition objectives, as it aims at combating unevenly dispersed effects of the energy transition, reducing greenhouse gas emissions and the impact of climate change and other environmental challenges. It aims at turning climate and environmental challenges into opportunities for all places and making the transition just and inclusive for all” (Consideration n. 12, p.3).*

Since its early activities, ESPON has conducted research focusing on demographic change (ESPON Thematic Project 1.1.4 Spatial effects of demographic trends and migration and ESPON 2013 DEMIFER - Demographic and Migratory Flows Affecting European Regions and Cities) or on territorial specificities (ESPON BRIDGES - Balanced Regional Development in areas with Geographic Specificities and ESPON 2020 GEOSPECS - Geographic Specificities and Development Potentials in Europe) providing reference for policymakers in elaborating development plans, particularly for rural areas (ESPON 2013 EDORA - European Development Opportunities in Rural Areas, and also specific Targeted Analysis such as SEMIGRA - Selective Migration and Unbalanced Sex Ratio in Rural Regions and PURR - Potential of Rural Regions). The last project on the issue was the ESPON ESCAPE project (European Shrinking Rural Areas: Challenges, Actions and Perspectives for Territorial Governance) focusing upon European rural regions experiencing, or threatened by, demographic decline.

On the other hand, the attention to the transition to a greener economy (ESPON GREECO - Territorial Potentials for a Greener Economy) evolved from a novel approach to integrating climate change and circular economy issues into spatial planning, evaluating GI potential to provide ecosystem services and contribute to development potentials of both urban and rural areas (ESPON GRETA - Green infrastructure: Enhancing biodiversity and ecosystem services for territorial development). This approach allows regional policymakers to apply useful methodologies and policy insights when elaborating development plans in which GI and Natural-based solutions are the backbone of climate change adaptation.

## Objective

The current start of next programming period, as well as the implementation of National Recovery Plan under Next Generation EU, provides the 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.

The National Strategy for the Demographic Challenge in Spain (2019, General guidelines<sup>3</sup>) has been prepared in a collaboration of Autonomous Regions and Cities with local entities, including the participation of the ministerial departments working group. In this strategy of a global and transversal nature, the Ministry for the Ecological Transition stressed the role of climate change adaptation and of a ‘just transition’ approach in most vulnerable groups and geographical areas, including rural areas.

The effects of climate change most directly and drastically affect the already vulnerable rural population. The impacts of climate change on agriculture, livestock, fisheries, and forestry are significant and will only continue to increase. The abandonment of agricultural, livestock, and forestry farms leads to a lack of opportunities in rural areas and the subsistence of the rural population. This subsequently leads to a loss of human capital (inhabitants move to urban areas in search of better jobs) and decapitalisation of the opportunities offered by the rural environment. At present, we can observe actions aimed at revitalising areas in decline that focus their

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3- Ministerio de Política Territorial y Función Pública (2019) Estrategia Nacional Frente al Reto Demográfico – Directrices Generales

efforts on common objectives: revitalising the rural environment, avoiding environmental degradation and, in short, attracting more people, by dynamically investing in rural areas. However, these actions do not pay sufficient attention to climate change. Reinforcing these processes of rural revitalisation must be understood as a necessary step to face our own future as a society. For this reason, the fight against climate change and the implementation of adaptation policies are fundamental for the maintenance of rural communities, reducing depopulation, and the creation of employment. Furthermore, the ecological transition presents numerous opportunities specifically for the rural world and for depopulated Spain. These opportunities are transformed into concrete measures in the National Integrated Energy and Climate Plan, the Just Transition Strategy, and the Climate Change and Energy Transition Law. The aim is to facilitate the creation of green jobs in the rural world through the promotion of renewable energies (solar, wind, biomass, biogas), the bioeconomy, improved management of the Natura 2000 network, the promotion of sustainable tourism, and forestry management.

The European Commission report on the Environmental Implementation Review 2019<sup>4</sup> for Spain expresses the need for further effort to promote a coherent integration of Natura 2000 into other policies and in the use of EU funds, including in the framework of the “Working Group on EU funding and biodiversity and nature conservation” under the Spanish Network of Environmental Authorities, the “Working Group on Spanish Rural Development programmes and Natura 2000 in Spain” launched by the Spanish Rural Network, as well as through the preparation of an updated Priority Action Framework (PAF) for the financing of the Natura 2000 Network, for the next financing period 2021-2027.

On the other hand, *“regarding the integration of environmental concerns into the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP), the two key areas for Spain (as for all Member States) are: i) using rural development funds to pay for environmental land management and other environmental measures, while avoiding financing measures which could damage the environment; ii) ensuring the effective application of cross-compliance, a compulsory horizontal measure affecting the first pillar of the CAP and the agri-environmental measures of the second pillar, as well as the “greening” measure of the first pillar of the CAP. Maintaining and strengthening this environmentally ambitious implementation of 1st pillar greening slightly contributes to improve the environmental situation in areas not covered by rural development, including intensive area”* (EIR, 2019, p.36).

This ESPON Peer Learning Workshop **Understanding Green Infrastructure and Shrinking rural areas** will focus on the potential role of Green Infrastructure in elaborating regional development plans for shrinking rural areas in the context of climate change policy requirements.

The objective is 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.

Policymakers, regional stakeholders, and researchers will share their experiences and discuss selected issues related to the situation in Spain and the role of planning in enhancing GI at different levels.

Some questions that will be discussed during the PLW include:

- How can GI be further integrated into spatial planning and territorial development? How can GI contribute to improving rural development plans (e.g. by considering different potentials of ecosystem services)?
- How can national, regional, and local authorities, as well as the private sector, be supported to effectively develop GI and to invest in ecosystem services?
- Who needs to be involved in the development and rollout of rural development strategies for fighting against depopulation and rural abandonment in Spain?

The ESPON territorial evidence gathered in previous studies will serve as background and will nurture the discussions around these three questions.

The workshop addresses policymakers and key strategic stakeholders responsible for national and regional development strategies in Spain and in European regions that are particularly affected by depopulation, especially in rural areas. Invitations are also extended to researchers and stakeholders that were involved in ESPON projects to reflect on how to better make use of, and incorporate territorial evidence into, national and regional practice.

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4- European Commission (2019) Environmental Implementation Review 2019. Country Report Spain COMMISSION STAFF WORKING DOCUMENT, *Accompanying the Communication Environmental Implementation Review 2019: A Europe that protects its citizens and enhances their quality of life*

## Structure and Input

The ESPON Peer Learning Workshop (PLW) ‘**Understanding Green Infrastructure and Shrinking rural areas**’ is structured into three parts:

The first part is devoted to **Green infrastructures (GI) and Shrinking rural areas: the potentiality of GI in depopulated areas** and it will focus on the territorial evidence provided by ESPON on these issues. The first reference discussed will be 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. Two Spanish cases will be illustrated: the Valencia Metropolitan Area and Euroregion Nouvelle Aquitaine-Euskadi-Navarre

The second part of the PLW will deal with **Operationalising GI and reacting to shrinkage**, with presentations focusing on three main questions: the potential of ecosystem services in conceiving a sustainable rural development (*Ecosystem services enhancement as enabler of sustainable rural development*); the strategic role of European policy in supporting the transition in rural areas (*The challenge of funds: Just Transition and EU Policy. Implications of the Green Deal for Rural Regions*); and the required change in spatial planning approaches (*How to emphasise the role of GI in regional development plans*)

The final session (**Panel discussion with local stakeholders**) will give the floor to Spanish stakeholders responsible at different levels of policy elaboration and strategy implementation to reflect on the evidence presented. From this, a discussion among speakers about opportunities, challenges faced, and policy changes required in support of a longer-term ecological transition will be developed.

## Agenda (Spanish Time)

9:30-9:45

### Welcome word and Introduction

- The ESPON programme and contribution of Spain in ESPON by **Dr. Wiktor Szydarowski** (ESPON EGTC Director)
- Introduction to ESPON knowledge on Green Infrastructures and Rural areas by **Michaela Gensheimer** (ESPON EGTC)
- Introduction to Demographic Challenge by **Francesc Xavier Boya Alós** (General Secretariat for the Demographic Challenge) (*tbc*)

9:45-10:30

**Session one: ESPON evidence and policy recommendations (20 min each)**  
Moderated by **Maria Prezioso** (University of Rome Tor Vergata - ECP-Italy)

### Green infrastructures (GI) and Shrinking rural areas: the potentiality of GI in depopulated areas

- **ESPON GRETA Green infrastructure: Enhancing biodiversity and ecosystem services for territorial development**  
With special focus on: GRETA Spanish Case Valencia Metropolitan Area and GRETA Transborder Spanish case Euroregion Case: Euroregion Nouvelle Aquitaine- Euskadi-Navarre - by **Mrs. Gemma Garcia-Blanco – TECNALIA**
- **ESCAPE European Shrinking Rural Areas: Challenges, Actions, and Perspectives for Territorial Governance**  
*ESCAPE Spanish case Alt Maestrà, Castellón, Spain* by **Adrián Ferrandis Martínez** and **Mar Ortega** (University of Valencia, Departamento de Geografía)
- Q&A

**10:30-10:45**

**Break**

**10:45-11:40**

**Session two:** Operationalising GI and reacting to shrinkage (20 min each)  
Moderated by **Tom Goosse** (researcher, AMRP-UGent)

- *Ecosystem services enhancement as enabler of sustainable rural development*, by **Jaume Fons-Esteve** (Universitat Autònoma Barcelona) (*tbc*)
- *The challenge of funds: the Just Transition and EU Policy. Implications of the Green Deal for Rural Regions*, by **David Meredith** (Research Officer TEAGASC Ireland, Rural Economy Development Programme)
- *How to emphasize the role of GI in regional development plans*, by **Joaquín Farinos** (University of Valencia)
- Q&A

**11:40-12:20**

**Session three:** Panel discussion with local stakeholders  
Moderated by **Jorge Luis Vega Valle**, - ESPON MC -Spain (Ministerio para la Transición Ecológica y el Reto Demográfico)

- **Fernando Valladares Ros** – Researcher at CSIC (MNCN)
- **M<sup>a</sup> Montserrat Castán Arnal** – Mayor of the municipality of Ansó (Huesca)
- **Jaime Izquierdo Vallina** – Commissioner for the Demographic Challenge at Principado de Asturias
- Discussion about opportunities and challenges

**12:20-12:30**

Conclusions by **Luuk Boelens** (ECP-Belgium) (*tbc*)



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#### ESPON 2022

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#### Disclaimer

This delivery does not necessarily reflect the opinion of the members of the ESPON 2020 Monitoring Committee.