

## Depopulation in Spain and violation of occupational rights

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### ABSTRACT

This article aims at revealing the impacts of depopulation in terms of the violation of the occupational rights of people who live in rural areas, away from large urban centres. The starting point is an overview of the inequalities that emerge in neglected rural areas in the European Union, followed by an analysis of the Spanish context with ageing as a salient factor. Then, the influence of rural territories on occupation is assessed, discussing the violation of occupational rights. Finally, there is a description of different macro and micro actions to address some of the occupational injustices in rural areas and to favour equality in the exercise of occupational rights from the standpoint of occupational science.

### KEYWORDS

Occupational science; Depopulation; Territory; Occupational rights; Occupational justice

Depopulation and ageing in rural areas are two issues currently faced by the European Union (EU), which are expected to be exacerbated in the near future (Connors et al., 2013; European Commission [EC], 2012a, 2015, 2019). The combination of reduced birth and death rates with higher life expectancies is increasing older age groups in most European countries (Burholt & Dobbs, 2012; EC, 2006). Population data reveal a high number of people 65 years and older in selected European countries, among them Italy, Greece, Germany, Portugal, Finland, and Bulgaria, even exceeding 20% of the population (Eurostat, 2018a).

The growth of old age groups with the ensuing change in the working age to population ratio is an additional factor that impacts labour productivity, threatening the maintenance of the welfare state. For example, estimates for the EU indicate that by 2060, there will be only two working age individuals per every person older than 65, compared with the present 4:1 ratio (EC, 2012a). This is expected to have obvious economic impacts in most EU countries (EC, 2012b). Population ageing can be most clearly seen in rural areas, with prevailing depopulation as a result of Young people's migration to urban areas with greater job choices (EC, 2017a, 2019). Reduced rural population is not a new phenomenon in Europe. From 1950 to 2018, rates have dropped from 15% to 6%, with expectations of a further fall to 4% by 2050. By then, an estimated 83.7% of Europeans will live in urban areas (United Nations, [UN], 2019), forecasting a constant decline of rural populations while the share of older people in rural compared to urban areas increases across Europe (Burholt & Dobbs, 2012; Eurostat, 2014; Klijn et al., 2005).

This pattern is uneven across Europe. In Spain, for example, the territorial and generational imbalance is stronger compared with other EU countries (Collantes & Pinilla, 2019; Del Molino, 2015). The latest population density data by Eurostat is 93.1 persons/km<sup>2</sup> in Spain, while the EU average is 118 persons/km<sup>2</sup> and Germany reaches 234 persons/km<sup>2</sup> (Eurostat, 2018a). On the other hand, when taking into account Spain's population density by region, demographic vulnerability reaches extremely severe levels. For example, Castilla- León or Castilla La Mancha have 25.7 persons/km<sup>2</sup>, Extremadura 26.1 persons/km<sup>2</sup> and Aragón 27.7 persons/km<sup>2</sup> (Eurostat, 2018b).

In terms of the number of senior citizens, the data indicates that Spain is one of the countries with the highest proportion of older population in the EU and throughout the world. In 2017, the group who are older than 65 years accounted for 18.8% of the population, and estimates for 2050 exceed 30% (Luesia & Morel, 2018; Vidal et al., 2017). There are also differences linked to gender given higher life expectancy rates among women, which involves a feminization of the process (Camarero et al., 2009; Vidal et al., 2017). Social isolation that is not desired or chosen, and the resultant subjective loneliness, have negative impacts on health and affect women to a larger extent, in part due to losses that take place during this stage in life (Bermeja & Ausín, 2018; Camarero et al., 2009; López & Díaz, 2018; Smallfield & Molitor, 2018;

Vidal et al., 2017). Given the economic situation of older people who live in rural areas in Spain it is noteworthy that farming and widow's pensions—more frequent in this context—are lower than pensions under other schemes (Ministerio de Inclusión, Seguridad Social, & Migraciones, 2020).

On the other hand, massive depopulation and marked rural population ageing are triggering changes in social and economic trends. Low demographic densities reduce the supply of services and the geographical dispersion of the population makes access difficult (Camarero et al., 2009; Defensor del Pueblo, 2019), thereby stressing health, social, and transportation services (Connors et al., 2013).

Either way, it should be noted that the higher number of older people in rural areas does not need to be a burden for the welfare system, since a growing number of elders are in good shape, have valuable skills and experience, and are willing to make considerable contributions in their settings. Unquestionably, promoting active ageing and ongoing contributions to society can be key to dealing with the challenge of an ageing population and ensuring the sustainability of rural areas (EC, 2012a, b). This is the line followed by a healthy ageing strategy aimed at keeping seniors fit, active, and independent, and at improving the sustainability and efficiency of health care and social systems (Eurostat, 2014).

Addressing these issues requires engagement and dialogue among different disciplines to develop new frameworks (Bruckmeier & Tovey, 2008; Lowe & Phillipson, 2006; Valero & López, 2019) that can incorporate diverse research and knowledge areas (Palonen et al., 2014; Valero & López, 2019). Among the many health-related disciplines, occupational therapy can take a leading role in helping prevent the consequences of social isolation among individuals and communities and promoting occupational engagement and social participation (Boldy & Grenade, 2011; Clemson & Laver 2014; Papageorgiou et al., 2016). Additionally, personal and collective empowerment can support older people to manage their own health, well-being, and participation (American Occupational Therapy Association [AOTA], 2014; Council of Occupational Therapists for the European Countries [COTEC], 2015).

Occupational science also has the potential of developing innovative ways of addressing occupational injustices (Laliberte Rudman, 2018; Pollard et al., 2010) and of contributing to the well-being of populations (Wilcock, 2001; Yerxa, 1993, 2000). Occupational science can also help promote occupation engagement of inhabitants impacted by depopulation and ageing. The original position paper about human rights by the World Federation of Occupational Therapy (WFOT, 2006), the subsequent work by Stadnyk et al. (2010), and the revision made by Thibeault (2013), convey the idea that communities can be protected through social transformation from the standpoint of occupational rights (Hocking, 2017). The introduction of the Participatory Occupational Justice Framework (Whiteford et al., 2017, 2018; Whiteford & Townsend, 2011), including a discussion about the relationship between occupation and territory (Pizarro et al., 2018), is expected to contribute to the dialogue and the design of actions to address these phenomena. The purpose of this paper is to show the impact of depopulation and ageing within a particular territory on the exercise of occupational rights, and how their violation results in forms of occupational injustice.

## **Analysis of the Territory-based Context and its Impacts on Occupations**

Occupational science has highlighted the relevance of taking territory into account to understand the complex nature of all the aspects that result in occupational injustice. Pizarro et al. (2018) suggested that the territory has an impact on occupational engagement opportunities that are determined by the construction of individual and collective meanings crossing occupational history and experiences concerning the territory. The authors highlighted four aspects to discuss situations of occupational injustice: “the multi-layered nature of the territory; the axis of space ownership; the power relations that cross them; and the relationship of the territory with the construction of identity” (Pizarro et al., 2018, p. 465).

In terms of the territory's multi-layered nature (Giménez, 1999, 2005; Ramírez, 2009), there has been an outflow of young people from rural to urban areas. While this displacement is often considered ‘free will’ (Pizarro et al., 2018), the truth is that individuals are forced to migrate from their villages to urban areas, giving up work in their rural setting.

This utilitarian-functional axis of the territory can result in lost opportunities associated with the relevance of this space. In terms of depopulation, access to social and health care services is limited by the lack of such resources and due to mobility-related difficulties. For example, long distances to schools make Access to education difficult (Teruel Existe, 2018) while the organization of teaching—grouping students from different grades and villages (Red Española de Desarrollo Rural, 2020)—has implications for the routine

of all those involved, both the children and adults in charge. Something similar happens with the health care services; specialized care is only offered in specific towns and primary health care is available only a few days a week (Gómez & Sanz, 2013; Instituto Aragonés de Estadística, 2020).

The territory's symbolic-expressive axis is related to the symbolic mark of a place, its history, and its nature. The rural setting changes when some occupations disappear; for example, certain farming areas and trades are being abandoned as there is no one available to work the land or tend the cattle, or to continue carrying out traditional occupations related to food collection and preservation. The disappearance of these tasks involves a loss of social and economic recognition (Camarero et al., 2009; Gómez & Sanz, 2013; Teruel Existe, 2018) and changes in their meaning.

Power relationships within a territory comprise the production, maintenance, and structure of the territories, and they can limit or modify the occupational engagement of individuals or groups. One example is the discontinuation of mining in Teruel (Teruel Existe, 2018); several territories were forced to shift their main productive activity and transform their jobs (Gómez & Sanz, 2013). Territorial identity refers to the socialization and ownership processes that are expressed in different ways (Pizarro et al., 2018). The individuals who decide to migrate from rural to urban areas experience several changes; for example, restrictions in the use of their own languages or dialects, which modifies their communication and relations with others. We think that the elements of territory proposed by Pizarro et al. (2018) impact the occupations of rural dwellers, who see how their traditions, identities, and lifestyles either change or disappear altogether.

### **The Violation of Occupational Rights in Rural Areas**

Occupational rights were defined by Hammell (2008) as “the right of all people to engage in meaningful occupations that contribute positively to their own well-being and the wellbeing of their communities” (p. 62). This concept expands the notion of occupational justice provided by Wilcock and Townsend (2000) by stressing the importance of equal opportunities and providing a language to articulate practical approaches to the World Federation of Occupational Therapists' (2006) initial Position Paper on Human Rights (Hammell, 2015a). The human rights concept “should be informed by a diversity of cultural perspectives” (Hammell & Iwama, 2012, p. 392). The occupational rights to which people aspire are different, based on the person and location. Likewise, there are differences in the inequalities that prevent the achievement of occupational rights (Hammell, 2017).

The structural factors that act as basic occupational determinants to create these inequalities for people who live in urban areas are: The economic model, domestic and foreign policies, values sustained by such policies, and cultural values. The interplay among these factors produces urban-centre conditions and laws which fail to take into account the cultural, social, and environmental wealth of rural areas and their relevance for the sustainability of life, in spite of the fact that rural areas act as suppliers for the cities (Stadnyk et al., 2010; Townsend & Wilcock, 2004).

Townsend and Wilcock (2004) expanded the concept of occupational justice by suggesting four occupational rights, with each right linked to one of the four forms of injustice: occupational imbalance, occupational deprivation, occupational marginalization, and occupational alienation. To these injustices we need to add a fifth one: Occupational apartheid (Kronenberg & Pollard, 2005). These rights focus on allowing meaningful occupations, and inclusion, autonomy, and diversity in engagement. This article is aimed at identifying how rights that are violated in rural areas can result in occupational injustice. Along these lines, we consider the Participatory Occupational Justice Framework (Whiteford & Townsend, 2011) as a potentially useful proposal to challenge occupational injustice situations in rural areas.

The first violation identified concerns the right to benefit from just privileges for the diverse participation in occupations. This violation gives rise to a territory-related occupational imbalance at the social level, based on which dwellers of unpopulated rural areas have less opportunities to engage in different occupations compared to those who live in large urban centres. Also identified is the violation of the right to experience occupation as meaningful and enriching, potentially leading to occupational alienation.

The limited opportunities to have a satisfactory job and the restricted access to social engagement or leisure occupations are the main drivers of injustices among young rural dwellers. Occupational deprivation and alienation can lead to territory-based occupational apartheid and could be related to the outflow of young people to the cities (Kronenberg & Pollard, 2005; Stadnyk et al., 2010; Townsend & Wilcock, 2004).

Perhaps the most evident violation of senior citizens' rights in this territory is the "occupational right to development by participating in a range of occupations for health and social inclusion" (Townsend & Wilcock, 2004, p. 80), leading to occupational deprivation, defined by Whiteford (2000) as "a state of exclusion in which people are precluded from engaging in occupations either needed and/or of meaning due to factors outside their immediate control" (p. 201).

Following Hammell (2015b), the example about transportation and communication in the rural world illustrates how policies, the economic system, and the underlying values condition access to occupations: The conditions of public transportation in many Spanish rural areas restrict the possibilities of people who do not own a car and/or a driver's license. This situation impacts mostly socially or financially vulnerable people, many of whom are older, who experience reduced opportunities to take part in family, community, educational, health care, leisure, productive, and other types of occupations. Noteworthy is the role of gender as a context-related inequality factor in this violation of rights, since a very high proportion of Spanish women older than 65 years never had a driver's license (Dirección General de Tráfico, n.d.).

The isolation emerging from depopulation and dependency associated with age, together with the lack of support and resources in rural areas, leads to occupational injustices as these individuals cannot engage in occupations that have always been meaningful and highly valuable for them. Often, solitude and the need for support to engage in occupations force these people, mostly women, to leave their community and place of residence to live with their family or in a retirement home, away from their own homes. This leads to uprooting, restricting access to meaningful occupations, particularly social events, as they lose most of their lifetime relationships. In the case of the retirement homes, the very process of being taken there can result in feelings of loneliness among older people (Bermeja & Ausín, 2018).

### **Ideas to Face Occupational Injustices in Rural Areas**

While depopulation and ageing in rural areas is a local phenomenon, the general context in which this takes place cannot be ignored (Margaras, 2016). All places are part of broader trends that are impacted by globalization and relations of interdependency. The analysis of the European territories impacted by depopulation can be useful "to compare diagnostics, answers, and promote network learning that can inspire shared, innovative, and contextrelated actions across the territory"<sup>1</sup> (Pinilla & Sáez, 2017, p. 18). For such purposes, all proposals aimed at reversing depopulation in rural areas must involve a comprehensive strategic plan that supports repopulation policies, improves access, and promotes quality services. Any improvement proposal should focus on guaranteeing access to social services, public health care services, or social engagement opportunities under equal conditions regarding urban populations. In addition, target communities should take an active role, empower themselves, and be part of the challenge (Palacios et al., 2017).

One suggestion to reverse this situation includes maintaining the rights and liberties of citizens and preventing inequalities in the Access to public resources. The strategies might also arise from international participation, and cooperation with local institutions with the support of political and economic agencies, both at the country, national, and European levels. Here are some examples. At the world level, the 2030 Agenda includes 193 States that are working towards the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Some of these goals are focused on reducing inequalities in combination with goals on health care and well-being, quality education, and decent work. Their aim is for communities around the world to maintain and improve health care, quality education, and decent work (ONU, 2015).

The EU has introduced improvement strategies that favour rural areas. For example, the European Regional Parliaments created the Depopulation and Ageing Workgroup to address these challenges jointly. This Workgroup is made up of 18 Legislative Assemblies from six member States (Spain, Italy, Germany, Austria, Belgium, and Portugal) (Conference of European Regional Legislative Assemblies, 2018). Another experience in the project called "Rural Needs and Mobile Learning", which brings jobs and training to depopulated and ageing rural areas that lack proximity to services or professionals trained in the care of dependent people (Rural Needs & Mobile Learning, 2020).

In Spain, projects that connect several regions are in place, such as the cross-territorial project "Abraza la Tierra" (Embrace the Land), which was formed by 18 local action groups from five regions (Abraza la Tierra, 2020). Other interesting local initiatives are available, including "Cátedra DPZ sobre Despoblación y Creatividad" (DPZ Lecture on Depopulation and Creativity), the aim of which is to expand meanings and encourage a language that can connect researchers and those in charge of designing and implementing

strategies with the citizens affected by depopulation. Other experiences are aimed at supporting cultural identities and bringing art closer to people, including “Pueblos en ARTE” and “Senderos de Teja”, where a group of young people from the Jacetania Region promote opportunities for rural dwellers and support population settlements (Cátedra DPZ sobre Despoblación y Creatividad, 2019; Pueblos en ARTE, 2020; Senderos de Teja, 2020).

The Participatory Occupational Justice Framework (Whiteford et al., 2017, 2018; Whiteford & Townsend, 2011) can be of use in these and other projects. Through engagement, local inhabitants can develop initiatives that lead to meaningful occupations and thereby recover their sense of community. By gaining awareness about existing occupational injustices, joint engagement can help in the development of strategies to favour local resource sustainability. Specifically, to promote local environmental sustainability, some stakeholders suggest occupation-based collaborative practices with local rural inhabitants and Project funding partners to address existing environmental challenges (Simo & Townsend, 2015).

For a successful and satisfactory ageing of seniors who live in rural areas, there is a need to know about their occupational needs and adopt the active ageing approach (Clemson & Laver, 2014; COTEC, 2010; Wilcock, 2007). A deeper understanding of senior citizens’ perspective on occupation might provide insights about the relationship among occupation, place, and individuals. At the same time, such knowledge is expected to be useful to conduct occupational interventions in rural áreas (Lundgren et al., 2020). The satisfactory engagement of seniors in social occupations and physical and recreational occupations can have a positive influence on the health and well-being of people and their communities (Alegre et al., 2010; Chang et al., 2014; Doble & Santha, 2008). The promotion of social and recreational opportunities that demand cognitive, physical, intellectual, or social skills has been proven to reduce cognitive decline and stimulate physical health (Karp et al., 2006; Smallfield & Molitor, 2018; Wang et al., 2002). Occupational science is in line with the active ageing approach as it fosters policies that develop friendly communities and favour the health and well-being of senior citizens (Zur & Laliberte Rudman, 2013).

Interdisciplinary strategies are required to provide support in cases of loneliness, whereby occupational scientists can promote and establish neighbours’ support networks. Programs to develop social engagement and recreation can be designed to mitigate social isolation and loneliness, and promote well-being (Smallfield & Molitor, 2018). Another key action could be to support cohousing projects for senior citizens in rural areas. Cohousing is not only an alternative to retirement homes but also a proposal for the development of rural communities, and it can additionally involve youth (Saiz, 2019).

Young settlers are required for the survival of rural areas. Through the Participatory Occupational Justice Framework, we can promote local job placement strategies, supporting the creation of collaboration groups to introduce creative, sustainable, and healthy businesses with local products, and favour the inclusion of migrants who are willing to lead a new life in rural areas. Interventions can be promoted that acknowledge local potentials and assets, fostering empowerment, accountability, and decision-making by people and communities in this context. To reduce the potential occupational alienation that can be experienced by youth people in rural areas, different activities could be organized, namely: vocational training programs; support for job adaptation; and favouring the sustainability of ecological resources, etc. Community participation, through engagement with local social stakeholders— including culture and arts, recreational, and housewives’ associations for social and environmental sustainability, etc.— is an opportunity to develop proposals that can have an impact on the exercise of occupational rights. Community involvement and the required facilitation and adjustments can help secure the occupational and social inclusion of people with difficulties, transforming them into improvement agents of their own communities.

## **Final Considerations**

An analysis of the territory and of the occupational rights that are infringed by depopulation and ageing in rural areas can be useful to acknowledge the situation of individuals who live in depopulated settings. The Participatory Occupational Justice Framework can help establish a process that facilitates actions to reverse the situation of Spain’s almost empty villages. Occupational science provides the required perspective to learn about and address this issue from the lens of occupational justice and occupational rights. In these depopulated and ageing settings, occupational science can act not only as a broker of resources but also in providing and supporting community processes and creative job development ideas, cultural identity protection, identification of meaningful occupations, and the maintenance of individual and community health and well-being.

## Note

1. TN, in Spanish in the original: “para contrastar diagnósticos, respuestas y fomentar un aprendizaje en red que inspire actuaciones compartidas, innovadoras y contextualizadas sobre el territorio” (Pinilla & Saez, 2017, p. 18).

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