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# **Rural development from the territorial governance in times of the coronavirus (Ocón, La Rioja, Spain)**

**José Ángel Llorente-Adán**

Universidad de La Rioja (La Rioja, España)

jose-angel.llorente@unirioja.es

<https://orcid.org/0000-0003-1193-2420>

**José Félix Ruíz-Tricio**

Ayuntamiento de Ocón (La Rioja, España)

ayto@elvalledeocon.org



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## ARTICLE SECTION

### **Rural development from the territorial governance in times of the coronavirus (Ocón, La Rioja, Spain)**

*Abstract:* This paper studies the declining demographic tendency and a loss of services and consumption offers during the second half of the XX century, the villages of Ocón (La Rioja, Spain) presented the same characteristics as most of the rural areas of the interior of the peninsula. Over the past two decades, Ocón has managed to reverse this situation, with a very active and dynamic local development, as it can be seen in the diversification of its economy, in the revitalization of its population centers through the execution of a multitude of projects and infrastructures and in a greater offer of services, which little by little are meeting the population's demands. Demographically, it has a high aging index which has managed to stabilize. The current situation of health crisis caused by the coronavirus has made consider the ways of life of the population in general and it seems that a better appreciation of the quality of life offered by the villages is taking place. Depending on how this situation was dealt with, small towns like Ocón can emerge stronger if a series of strategy lines are carried out to consolidate a sustainable progress, solving the lack of the most urgent services such as the slow Internet connection, a key in the current development of society and teleworking.

*Key words:* Local development, land-use planning, demographic challenge, virus (COVID-19), sustainability.

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## IDEAS CLAVE / HIGHLIGHTS / IDEES CLAU

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| <ol style="list-style-type: none"><li>1. Las áreas rurales en España son importantes porque suponen el 85 % del territorio.</li><li>2. La crisis del coronavirus supone al mundo rural una oportunidad frente al despoblamiento.</li><li>3. Con el coronavirus la demanda más inmediata de los pueblos es la mejora de Internet.</li><li>4. El progreso de los pueblos pasa por la mejora de las telecomunicaciones.</li><li>5. Un mejor servicio de Internet permitiría asentar población en los pueblos.</li></ol> | <ol style="list-style-type: none"><li>1. Rural areas in Spain are important because they represent 85 % of the territory.</li><li>2. The crisis of the coronavirus is an opportunity for the rural world to face the depopulation.</li><li>3. With the coronavirus, the most immediate demand from the people is to improve the use of Internet.</li><li>4. The progress of the villages depends on the improvement of telecommunications.</li><li>5. A better Internet service would allow the population to settle in the villages.</li></ol> | <ol style="list-style-type: none"><li>1. Les àrees rurals a Espanya són importants perquè suposen el 85 % del territori.</li><li>2. La crisi del coronavirus suposa al món rural una oportunitat enfront del despoblament.</li><li>3. Amb el coronavirus la demanda més immediata dels pobles és la millora d'Internet.</li><li>4. El progrés dels pobles passa per la millora de les telecomunicacions.</li><li>5. Un millor servei d'Internet permetria asentar població als pobles.</li></ol> |
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## EXTENDED ABSTRACT<sup>1</sup>

The geographical importance of rural areas in Spain is fundamental, as they occupy 85% of the national territory. However, they have not acquired the prominence they deserve, as they have not been given an active role in national decision-making. This fact explains, in part, the loss of importance of rural areas within the country's political and development strategies. This prominence has been associated with the demographic loss of rural environments throughout practically the whole of the 20th century and the first decades of the current one. A phenomenon that has worked as a kind of vicious circle where the decision-making power of the villages was lost as their services and population were reduced. This has happened especially in the interior of the country and some authors have called it "Empty Spain".

The diversity of rural areas, each with its own characteristics and peculiarities that define them, means that the same line of action cannot be taken, since the socio-economic reality of each rural area is complex and different. In this sense, territorial governance as an instrument for managing and regulating the needs and demands of each territory, based on citizen participation, among other agents, can serve to improve and incorporate decision-making in the rural world into major proposals or policies at the national level.

Little by little, over the last few decades, certain rural areas have been awakening from their own lethargy and have gradually incorporated initiatives and projects in recent times that have made it possible to considerably improve the services they offer and to reactivate them. First from public initiative and, later, from private entrepreneurship which is beginning to be seen as attractive. For all of this, all circumstances must be considered, both endogenous and exogenous, in order to strengthen and consolidate the progress of the rural space.

During this year the health crisis generated by the spread of the coronavirus (COVID-19) has transformed many aspects of life on a global and local scale. This forces us to think about the strategic lines to continue in many areas including local development and territorial governance.

The measures taken to deal with the pandemic caused by COVID-19, such as the confinement of Spanish society to their homes, have made many questions rethinkable and have put the spotlight on the rural world by reconsidering its ways of life.

For this reason, this survey reveals the main local development strategies followed in Ocón, a village in La Rioja, in the north of Spain, located in the northern mountains of the Iberian System of La Rioja. So, it is verified how during the last two decades the Ocon villages have managed to revitalize themselves thanks to the involvement of different institutions, from the local corporation guided by the figure of the local development agent, the regional administration, as well as a local action group in charge of managing and financing a good part of their improvements. In this sense, the actions carried out in terms of recovery, conservation and protection of heritage (religious, popular, civil, archaeological); the provision of new infrastructure (health centres, social centres, green areas, improved communications); socio-economic improvements (boosting employment, training courses, employment workshops); promotion and dissemination campaigns (corporate image, distinctive of the valley, informative publications, sports and popular events) stand out; investment in tourism (youth hostel, recreational areas, camping area, equestrian or cycle tours, art exhibitions or ethnographic festivals), as well

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<sup>1</sup> Authors' exclusive translation. The full version of the article is available in Spanish.

as in the environment, trying to promote the Agenda 2030 focused on sustainable development (promotion of renewable energies, public awareness, promotion of responsible rural and nature tourism, ecological agriculture), mainly. All this has contributed to its socio-economic progress and to an improvement in the quality of life of its inhabitants.

In order to find out the most current demands of the people living in the villages of Ocón, just at the time of the coronavirus pandemic, a questionnaire has been carried out to find out what the situation is and the most immediate needs of the inhabitants of the Ocón valley are, and thus to direct the new present and future strategies for action. The objective is to continue with the reactivation and diversification of its economy with the aim of making it attractive and welcoming new inhabitants by providing most of the essential needs that today's society demands within the context of sustainable local development as promoted by the UN through Agenda 2030.

This questionnaire has been answered by 112 people who are either inhabitants of Ocón or people directly linked to the villages in the valley. Of the 301 inhabitants registered according to the INE (2020), around 10% completed the form, in addition to direct descendants who also know very well the most immediate needs of Ocón that have arisen or been accentuated since the beginning of the health crisis generated by the coronavirus. The form consisted of questions related to social services, local development, possible changes caused by the pandemic or citizen participation and was completed during the month of May 2020.

The results of the form highlight aspects such as the high level of involvement and commitment of the people surveyed, 94%. A large majority, 81%, consider the local development of the last two decades to be satisfactory. Proximity services are the worst valued (70%), as are financial and educational services because they are non-existent, as well as connectivity and access to the Internet. This last aspect is a deep concern at the present time of the pandemic, given that the use of the Internet and its need as a means of communication or for teleworking has increased.

Lack of internet connection is ranked as the top concern for people in Ocón today, according to 90% of respondents. Eighty percent of the questionnaires reflect a concern about job opportunities, although they appreciate an improvement and diversification in recent years. For the vast majority, the future of their villages lies in improving connectivity or, once again, the rural world will be left out of the demands of today's society and will not be able to emerge stronger, compared to the urban world, from this health crisis.

In short, we can see how the global crisis of the coronavirus is also generating important transformations on a local scale in rural areas. The current measures of confinement and social isolation have reversed the vision that for decades has been held of the villages as their lifestyle has been considered more attractive to face this health crisis. Since the beginning of the pandemic, there has been an increase in the arrival of descendants or people linked to these small towns to live temporarily during this time of uncertainty. Even the second residences have been prolonged in time or the rural tourism sector has been strengthened in the face of greater difficulties in leaving the country. How the local development of these rural areas is tackled and managed will depend on whether they are strengthened by taking advantage of the current circumstances to improve the management of some of their basic services such as improvements in telecommunications or the Internet, as has been shown from the questionnaire.

At this point, it is worth asking whether rural municipalities such as Ocón will be able to adapt to the demands of a society in continuous change and present an alternative to the cities, which will make them attractive and worthy of being a focus of population attraction. Given that, in the area of telecommunications, the urban world has many facilities, the current health crisis can be used as a reason to confront the threat of depopulation to which they have been subjected for decades.

From here, a greater recognition of the rural world by regional and national institutions is demanded. It is not possible to get a real push from the people if decisions and laws continue to be made from the city. Town and country planning requires first-hand knowledge of the needs, strengths and weaknesses of the people in order to manage the sustainable progress that best suits the peculiarities of each territory.

In this sense, it is necessary to ensure that politicians and public administrations pay more attention to the demands arising from the towns and, therefore, that they are able to assess the enormous weight they have in aspects such as: the structuring of the territory, the conservation of historical and cultural heritage, the maintenance of the roots and signs of cultural and ethnographic identity, the importance of the agricultural sector, the management of forests and the protection of the landscape, among others.