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The importance of citizen participation in rural development decision-making (Rincón de Soto, La Rioja, Spain)

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ARTICLE SECTION

The importance of citizen participation in rural development decision-making (Rincón de Soto, La Rioja, Spain)

Abstract: Located in the Ebro valley, Rincón de Soto is a dynamic municipality in La Rioja (Spain). Its municipal area is small, of 19 km², although with very fertile land and a long agricultural tradition, which is threatened by the construction of a new railway line. Its strong economic structure is based on a powerful industrial sector and a highly competitive intensive farming could be negatively affected. The great future challenge for the town will be to face the integration of the railway from a participatory governance point of view. The aim of this paper is to contribute, from a geographic perspective, greater clarity (landscape, environmental, socioeconomic, ethnographic), as well as to highlight the importance of citizen participation in decision-making. Methodologically, a questionnaire among the inhabitants of Rincón has been carried out. The results from these questionnaires are the ones presented in this scientific paper. The rural development of Rincón will be boosted or slowed down depending on how this challenge is tackled. As in any process of territorial governance, the best decision will be the one that has the support of the citizens and, in this case, people from Rincon are in favor of the southern route of the two proposed bypass projects.

Key words: Local development, regional planning, participatory governance.

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IDEAS CLAVE / HIGHLIGHTS / IDEES CLAU

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| <p>1. La gobernanza ciudadana es fundamental en la toma de decisiones del desarrollo local.</p> <p>2. La utilidad del saber geográfico en la gestión de las relaciones ser humano – territorio.</p> <p>3. El desarrollo rural debe contar con la participación ciudadana de la gente que lo habita.</p> <p>4. Rincón de Soto no se opone a la variante ferroviaria, pero decide por donde proyectarse.</p> <p>5. La opción sur de la variante ferroviaria es la más idónea para Rincón.</p> | <p>1. Citizen governance is fundamental in local development decision-making.</p> <p>2. The usefulness of geographical knowledge in the management of human-territory relations.</p> <p>3. Rural development must count on the citizen participation of the people who live there.</p> <p>4. Rincón de Soto is not opposed to the railway alternative, but it decides where to project it.</p> <p>5. The southern option of the railway alternative is the most suitable for Rincón.</p> | <p>1. La governança ciutadana és fonamental en la presa de decisions del desenvolupament local.</p> <p>2. La utilitat del saber geogràfic en la gestió de les relacions ésser humà- territori.</p> <p>3. El desenvolupament local ha de comptar amb la participació ciutadà de la gent que l’habita.</p> <p>4. Rincón de Soto no s’oposa a la variant ferroviària, però decideix per on s’ha de projectar.</p> <p>5. La opció sud de la variant ferroviària és la més idònia per a Rincón.</p> |
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EXTENDED ABSTRACT¹

In Spain, 85% of territory is considered to be rural, denoting its importance. Since the 1990s and during the first two decades of this century, the economic diversification of the rural environment has been a constant, allowing a more open society capable of taking advantage of all the opportunities offered by today's globalised world.

Within the Spanish rural world there are clear imbalances between regions. On the one hand, those with a more complicated scenario, such as the mountainous areas and those far from the main communication routes, with marked depopulation and a continuous economic decline. On the other hand, those areas, generally semi-urban, close to the main transport axes or large population centres, with a significant socio-economic dynamism. The case presented here, Rincón de Soto, is one of the latter, as it is located in one of the most dynamic and industrially diversified areas, not only in La Rioja, but also in Spain and Europe, such as the Ebro valley.

This village of La Rioja has a small municipal area, 19 km². Its soils are very rich and as a result it has a long and fertile agricultural tradition. Currently and during the last two decades, the planning of a railway alternative threatens to put an end to part of this agriculture by projecting it through the surroundings of the municipality that is most precious to the local population. Over the last twenty years, the different public administrations have repeatedly presented different proposals, one to the north of the municipality, just between the river Ebro and the village, and a second, to the south, which is the proposal most widely accepted by the local population. The current situation of uncertainty and approaches that are not taking into account the will of the majority of the people, but rather serve private and political interests subject to legislative itinerancy, makes this an unresolved issue over time, a thorny and confrontational result in the public debate in the municipality.

In view of this situation, the main future challenge facing the village is to face the integration of the railway from the perspective of participatory governance, that is, taking into account the will of the inhabitants of Rincón as the main actors of their territory, in order to contribute to sustainable development. The aim of this work is to provide, from the geographical knowledge, greater clarity to the issue by assessing aspects such as landscape elements, environmental impact, socio-economic and ethnographic transformations that may result from an erroneous decision. In this sense, and in order to avoid a solution that does not respond to local interests, one of the main objectives is to value the importance of citizen participation in the decision-making process of projects as vital for local development as the development of a railway infrastructure. The aim is to empower the will of the people in the management and planning of the municipality in order to achieve greater social and territorial cohesion.

Methodologically, in addition to the usual bibliographical consultation and support for research work of this nature, a questionnaire was carried out among the population of Rincon de la Frontera, from which the statistical results presented in this article were extracted and which allow some of the main conclusions to be drawn. This fieldwork is part of a broader and more in-depth study that covers many other socio-economic, demographic and environmental aspects of the village itself. The tool used to create this form was the Microsoft Office 365 application, Forms, which allows questionnaires to be created digitally. The dissemination procedure among the population of Rincon was

¹ Traducción exclusiva de los autores / Authors' exclusive translation.

through social networks. The link to access the form was shared through WhatsApp groups of cultural, sports or neighbourhood associations, among other groups that are part of the local social network. This made it possible to cover the expected level of reach, limiting its dissemination to the local sphere. The questionnaire was open and available for one week during Christmas 2020-2021. It was completed anonymously and voluntarily by about 150 people. This is equivalent to approximately 4% of the current total population of the municipality. An acceptable percentage in this type of statistical study that reinforces and gives rigour to the conclusions drawn from it. The population considered as the sample universe was all those people who had a direct relationship with Rincón: registered residents, descendants or other close links.

Throughout the work, the current situation of this village of La Rioja is geographically contextualised, the most notable characteristics of which are as follows. With regard to its location, it is situated in the middle section of the Ebro valley, in the north-eastern part of La Rioja, right on the border with the Autonomous Community of Navarre. It is close to the main communication routes in the region, the N-232, AP-68, AP-15, LR-115, NA-134 and the Castejón-Miranda de Ebro railway network. Its strategic location explains part of its economic dynamism, together with a long tradition of intensive agriculture, the early development of an agri-food industry and the subsequent development of other industrial sectors, such as furniture, which consolidate its economic strength. Its demographic evolution is positive, rising from 2,000 inhabitants in 1900 to 3,886 today. Despite having a stagnant or negative natural population growth, the reception of immigrants has led to a positive trend over the last few decades. The attraction of the population from abroad, mainly foreigners, is due to its large job offer, with current unemployment rates of around 10%, well below the national average.

With regard to the development of the railway infrastructure, the municipality initially requested the possibility of removing the tracks from its urban centre. Since then, at the end of the 20th century and the beginning of the 21st century, the different political administrations, conditioned by the temporary nature of the legislation, have repeatedly put forward various alternatives, focusing on two main options. A project for a railway alternative in the north, between the town centre and the Ebro, coinciding with the most fertile lands and the recreational environment of the people of Rincon. The second option, to the south, with a complete route within the municipality, like the previous one, but through a less valued environment and with greater support from the local population, as stated in the aforementioned questionnaire. With these premises, in recent times the regional and national administrations seem to support the option contrary to the will of the majority of the people, the northern route.

This has provoked the rejection and dissatisfaction of the majority of the people of Rincon. Faced with the possibility of a political decision being imposed over the interests of the territory itself and its inhabitants, the importance of citizen participation, also known as participatory governance, in the making of transcendental decisions such as the current transport infrastructure is raised. In this sense, the consultation carried out, which has already been presented above, has a place here. The questionnaire allows to collect the opinion and the will of the population of Rincón de Soto, who responded anonymously and freely. When the population was presented with the two possibilities proposed by the administration, North or South, 23% chose the former option, while 77% supported the South option. On the other hand, when asked about four possibilities, such as: to take the tracks out of the urban centre at all costs (13%), to leave the tracks as they are (19%), to take the tracks out of the urban area in the North (9%) or to take the tracks in the South (60%), the results are logically divided, and although the majority of the population

prefers to leave the tracks as they are, the majority support for the railway route to the South of the municipality was repeated.

Given these premises and other more detailed results set out in the article, the administration must act as a manager and agent in charge of a correct territorial planning that responds to the real needs and interests of the population of Rincón. The political powers must be subordinated to and rely on territorial governance in order to reach the most appropriate proposals and solutions possible, taking into account the peculiarities of each territory.

In this case of the development of the railway alternative in Rincón de Soto, the majority is clearly in favour of the southern route, since the opposite option would have more serious impacts that would hinder the rural development of the municipality, would affect the landscape value of the Ebro area and the fertile land between the river and the urban area, and would entail a fragmentation of this space that is part of the collective memory and the identity of the village itself, which highlights its enormous ethnographic and cultural value. In this sense, Rincón de Soto must position itself in unison so that, if the railway alternative is finally carried out, it is done in the area that least affects the sustainable progress of the village, that is, in the south of its municipal district.