

## **Foreign and Spanish-nationality migratory flows in Catalan rural areas (1996-2009): End of depopulation or new territorial patterns?**

Fernando GIL ALONSO

[fgilalonso@gmail.com](mailto:fgilalonso@gmail.com)

Jordi BAYONA i CARRASCO

[jordibayona@ub.edu](mailto:jordibayona@ub.edu)

Human Geography Department

University of Barcelona

c. Montalegre, 6

08001 - Barcelona

Since the mid 1990's, international migration has been the most important demographic change in Spain, as it has been responsible for 70% of the demographic growth since 1996. Most of the foreign population flows have been directed towards big urban areas, although they have also increased in tourist areas, particularly those near the sea, and intensive agriculture ones. However, rural areas in general, where the impact of foreign immigration has also been strong, have received little attention even though they were under a strong aging process and were losing population since the 1960s. Moreover, the incipient return flows of these last two decades not only have not been able to reverse this decreasing trend but have accentuated the aging process.

However, the socio-economic and demographic changes which a certain number of rural municipalities have recently undergone, together with the arrival of locally relevant volumes of active age foreigners, suggests certain questions like:

- if they imply that a new demographic recovery phase is starting in rural areas;
- if they are substituting Spanish population which would continue to decrease;
- or if, on the contrary, they would be helping to stimulate the demographic recovery of Spanish population;
- and finally, if these territorially diversified arrival flows will accentuate differences between the “dynamic rural” areas and the “rural regressive” ones.

This paper aims to analyse the situation in the smallest municipalities in Catalonia so the latter questions can start to be answered. A typology of these will also be built according to the impact which foreign migration flows have had on their local demographic dynamics.

*Padron Continuo* and *Movimiento Natural de la Población* (MNP) data up to January the 1st 2009 have been used to do it. All the inhabitants of a municipality, even illegal foreign immigrants, should be registered in the local continuous register called the *Padron Continuo*, while the MNP collects flows determining natural growth, i.e. births and deaths.

Even though most studies define rural municipalities as those with less than 10,000 inhabitants, here the limit has been established at 1,000 inhabitants meaning that 480 municipalities, or in other words, nearly half of the 946 Catalan municipalities, have been included. These would be precisely those where population dynamics are more negative, avoiding capitals of *Comarca* (small counties) which are bigger and normally have a different population dynamics than the rest of the surrounding rural territory.

Approximately 200,000 people live in these small municipalities with less than 1,000 inhabitants, representing 2.6% of the Catalan population. Among these are more than 18,000 foreign residents, i.e. 9.4% of the total rural population. These municipalities are generally situated away from the coast and the metropolitan area of Barcelona, and occupy a significant part (51.4%) of the Catalan territory, mainly in inland Catalonia.

Preliminary results show that, even though practically all these small municipalities have received foreign immigrants, around half of them are still losing population or have a small increase. Only small municipalities placed near the Barcelona metropolitan region or in tourist areas (in or close to the Pyrenees, or near the Mediterranean coast) have significantly increased their population. Therefore, the arrival of international immigrants, reinforced or counteracted by Spanish internal flows, has emphasized the territorial dichotomy between a few dynamic rural areas and regressive ones, the latter still occupying most of inland Catalonia.