

Article

Immigration and Local Endogenous Development in Rural Border Areas: A Comparative Study of Two Left-Behind Spanish Regions

Cristóbal Mendoza * and Josefina Domínguez-Mujica

Department of Geography, Research Institute of Text Analysis and Applications (IATEX),
University of Las Palmas de Gran Canaria, 35003 Las Palmas, Spain; josefina.dominguezmujica@ulpgc.es

* Correspondence: cristobal.mendoza@ulpgc.es

Abstract: Despite longstanding concerns about regional inequalities in both national and EU policy, the concept of ‘left-behindness’ has gained prominence in public and political discourse due to widening social and spatial disparities. A defining characteristic of left-behind areas is outmigration, ageing, and depopulation, yet the impact of incoming mobility remains underexplored. To bridge this gap, this article explores the role of international immigration in sustaining local economies in two left-behind border regions of Spain—Ribagorza (Huesca) and Sayago (Zamora). Grounded in the migration-development nexus, it argues that mobility can drive economic, social, and demographic revitalization, fostering sustainability and strengthening the social fabric of these rural communities. This research identified the case study areas based on their low local human development index, which integrates quantitative demographic, social, and economic indicators. It further examines migration dynamics through a qualitative approach, gathering insights via in-depth interviews. The paper analyses how the borderland conditions in those left-behind areas of Ribagorza and Sayago have influenced their demographic dynamics, with a particular focus on recent migration trends. It also examines the influence of local governance in shaping economic and social initiatives, such as entrepreneurship and immigration policies. The comparative analysis of Ribagorza and Sayago underscores the interplay between economy, migration, and local governance in shaping rural development in border left-behind areas. Ribagorza’s stronger governance structures, economic diversification, and higher immigrant integration have contributed to modest population stabilization. Sayago, despite its border advantages and cross-border labour exchanges, struggles with weaker governance, limited economic opportunities, and a rapidly ageing population.

Keywords: international migration; lifestyle entrepreneurs; Spain; local development; border; governance

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1. Introduction

While regional inequalities have long been a focus of both national and EU policy, the concept of ‘left-behindness’ has gained prominence in public and political discourse amid growing social and spatial disparities. The economic literature and policy design are increasingly centred on understanding the local drivers of development within a new paradigm that has led to more localized interventions [1]. These efforts aim to harness

economic potential and address left-behindness in alignment with the evolving concepts of “new ruralities” and mobility paradigms.

A key feature of left-behind areas is outmigration, ageing, and depopulation, which not only hamper local economies but also make their territory more socially vulnerable. As younger generations leave for urban areas, these regions see a demographic shift toward an older population, which increases the demand for services, particularly health services, without a corresponding growth in the workforce to support them [2]. This emigration often further isolates ageing communities and limits opportunities for economic growth. This results in a Catch-22 situation in which the older population may not continue with their previous labour activities, while no new jobs are created because of the emigration of young people [3].

This is particularly acknowledged in European border regions, which are identified as some of the rural areas most affected by de-agrarianizing and depopulation [4,5]. These factors persist despite the European Union’s longstanding focus on cross-border regions, as demonstrated by the early establishment of the Association of European Border Regions (AEBR) in 1971. This commitment is also evident in numerous cooperation initiatives, including the INTERREG programmes and the complementary LACE (Linkage Assistance and Cooperation for the European border regions), launched in 1990; the EURES Cross-Border Partnerships in 1994; and the most recent, the 2018 b-solutions project. Spain has been actively involved in these efforts since signing the European Framework Convention on cross-border cooperation in May 1981.

However, these initiatives have not always produced tangible results. Many border regions in Europe, especially those in distant rural areas, struggle to attract new residents, including farm labourers, lifestyle migrants, and remote workers looking for a quieter setting and more affordable housing [6,7]. Newcomers actively contribute to improving local amenities and connectivity, ultimately fostering a stronger sense of community [8]. In turn, their presence plays a crucial role in enhancing rural community resilience [9], both of which are essential in mitigating population decline and ageing. The point to stress here is that not all rural areas have the same capacity to attract new residents: while some struggle with weak labour markets and limited ability to integrate certain types of immigrants, others are better positioned to accommodate and benefit from their arrival [10]. It seems then that a demographic and spatial dichotomy has emerged between the more and the less developed rural areas in Spain (and across Europe) [11].

A growing body of research explores the experiences of various (mainly foreign-born) immigrant groups in rural settings, such as those working in farming and agri-food, tourism, caregiving, and lifestyle/amenity sectors [12,13]. Immigrants settling in rural areas face distinct challenges, including limited local knowledge and resources to support diversity, small population sizes that hinder the development of institutional infrastructure, and concerns among long-time residents that newcomers may disrupt traditional ways of life. Although immigrants have been recognized for filling essential roles in the rural labour market [14], their potential to drive economic growth through skills, training, networks, and entrepreneurship is only beginning to be fully appreciated [15,16].

From another perspective, the new mobilities paradigm [17] strongly affected scientific debates on migration, assuming that mobility is “normal”. As a consequence, we must not consider migration as one single act but acknowledge ongoing negotiations of mobility and immobility [18]. Moreover, as Salazar suggests [19], “mobility and immobility are not mutually exclusive categories but, rather, two dynamic sides of the same coin” (p. 6). In fact, migration processes only constitute a relatively small part of spatial movements and blurring boundaries between residential mobilities and habitual/everyday mobilities

are observable. In line with this, Milbourne and Kitchen introduced the term rural mobilities encompassing “movements into, out of, within and through rural places” (p. 385–386) [20].

Alongside demographic shifts, rural areas across Europe have undergone major economic transformations in recent decades. Rural regions can no longer be defined solely for agriculture [21,22], but as multifunctional areas, increasingly evolving into spaces for consumption and leisure [23,11]. This functional shift has resulted in a diverse countryside where multiple stakeholders have legitimate interests in shaping its future [14,24]. This paradigm on “new ruralities” aligns with the discussion on the key role of international migration in rural areas, and the new mobilities paradigm.

Building on these premises, the contribution of the paper advances research on the role of international immigration in supporting local economies, promoting sustainability, and revitalizing the social fabric in two left-behind border regions. It offers diverse perspectives by comparing the economic structures and distinct population dynamics of Ribagorza, a *comarca* (like a county) in the Huesca province in the Spanish Pyrenees, and Sayago, located in Zamora province along the Spanish–Portuguese border (see Figure 1).



Figure 1. Location of Ribagorza (Huesca) and Sayago (Zamora) in Spain. Source: Guillermo Benito Pérez.

This comparative analysis highlights the diverse factors shaping left-behind areas and, consequently, the limitations of case studies in making broad generalizations. However, it offers new insights into the literature on left-behindness, particularly regarding the role of migration in revitalizing rural border regions, which has been largely overlooked in discussions on left-behindness.

The specific objectives of the paper are as follows: (i) analyze how the borderland condition has influenced the demographic dynamics of the study areas, with a particular focus on recent migration trends; (ii) evaluate and compare the role of immigrants in driving local economic and social development; (iii) identify entrepreneurial initiatives led by immigrants and assess their impact on the local economy; and (iv) examine and compare

the influence of the local governance in shaping economic and social initiatives, such as entrepreneurship and immigration policies.

This article is structured as follows. The different sections outline the theoretical framework and research methods used in this study. This is developed by an extensive discussion of the results. First, the demographic profiles of both regions are compared from the mobility and ageing perspectives. Second, the article examines the role of immigrant entrepreneurship, focusing on the type of businesses and initiatives immigrants establish in both regions. Third, the impact of the border is analyzed. Fourth, the role of local governance in shaping regional development through resource mobilization, business attraction, and the strengthening of social capital is explored. Finally, it concludes with a summary of the findings and recommendations for further research on left-behind areas in Europe.

2. Theoretical Background: Immigration and Local Development in Left-Behind Rural Areas

As stated in the introduction, the condition of left-behindness can be understood as the outcome of the intersection of geographical perspectives on local development, new ruralities, mobility, and borders (Figure 2).

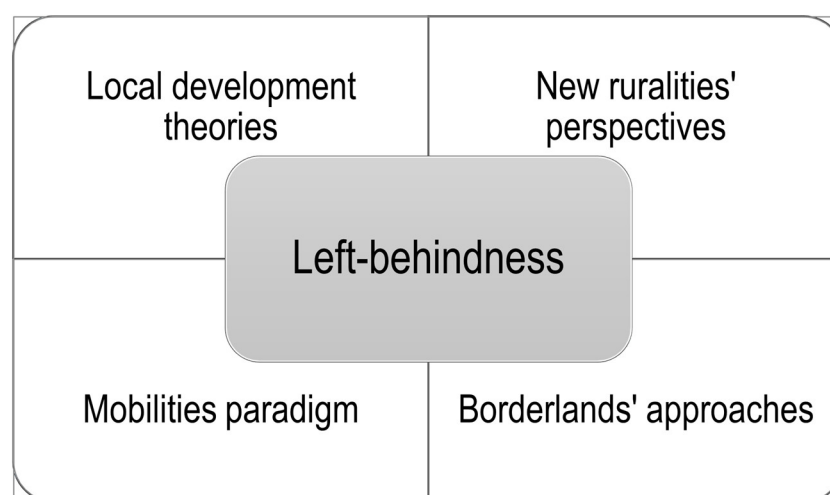


Figure 2. Existing theories in relation to the research topic. Source: Authors. **Note:** The grey colour symbolizes the intersection of various paradigms, emphasizing the notion of “left-behindness”.

Generally, in left-behind areas, immigration increases and economic evolution are interdependent, as growth in the number of people residing in these areas eventually raises labour force participation and overall economic productivity [25,26]. In left-behind rural areas, the relationship between migration and development has often been studied in the context of so-called less developed countries, where migrants’ remittances and resources have somehow helped local development [27,28]. However, due to demographic shifts (i.e., declining birth and death rates leading to smaller household sizes and longer life expectancies) along with the out-migration of young people, many rural regions in the Global North now rely on an influx of new residents for economic growth or even survival [29,30].

The article’s central premise is that, in contexts marked by ageing populations and depopulation, the arrival of new residents is essential for fostering local development of rural communities in Spain. In Southern Europe as a whole, rural–urban migration was substantial during the 1960s and 1970s, driven largely by limited economic opportunities

in rural areas [31–34]. In Spain, this migration led to a significant population imbalance, concentrating people along the Mediterranean coast, in the islands, the Basque Country, and Madrid, while leaving much of the country sparsely populated [35,36]. Since the 1980s, traditional rural–urban migration patterns have increasingly been complemented by “counter-urbanization” flows towards rural areas well-connected with major cities [37]. Ironically, in Spain, the improvement of infrastructures (e.g., high-speed trains) has further intensified territorial disparities, concentrating resources, services, and population in large metropolitan regions (most notably Madrid), while remote rural areas continue to experience socioeconomic decline and depopulation [38,39]. This trend has been especially evident since the economic recovery of 2014–2015, when cities regained their central role, reversing patterns of suburbanization and counter-urbanization [40]. Despite the temporary disruption caused by the pandemic in 2020 and 2021, this pattern has persisted [41].

Immigration, and particularly international immigration, has been decisive in reversing decreasing population trends and maintaining economic activities in rural Southern Europe [42,43]. This is particularly true for intensive agriculture, which is characterized by family-based small farms and a significant dependence on seasonal labour during harvest time [12,44]. Despite this, the role of agriculture in Southern Europe has steadily declined over recent decades in terms of both employment and its share of GDP. In Spain, agriculture accounted for only 2.3% of GDP in 2023 [45] and employed just 6.3% of the workforce in the same year [46]. However, the role of immigrant workers in Southern European rural areas extends beyond agriculture; they also participate in other economic activities, including construction, hospitality, restaurants, and elderly care, all of which are vital to local economies and community welfare [43,47].

In addition to traditional workers, rural areas also attract lifestyle immigrants who relocate, often from abroad, in search of a more fulfilling way of living [48,49]. Lifestyle immigrants are characterized as “relatively affluent individuals, moving either part-time or full-time, permanently or temporarily, to places which, for various reasons, signify for the migrants something loosely defined as quality of life” [48] (p. 621). Consequently, migration is viewed as part of an individual’s life trajectory, with destinations selected based on how well they align with personal life goals [50,51]. Often, these immigrants are retirees [49,52]. However, when lifestyle immigrants are economically active, they tend to prefer self-employment over traditional employment, seeking to maintain a balance between their personal and professional lives in their new environment [53,54]. As a result, the businesses they establish are often small and undercapitalized, possibly because they are concerned that significant business success could interfere with their desired work–life balance [48]. Indeed, research has indicated that lifestyle immigrants’ enterprises have a minimal impact on local economic development and job creation, often because they lack long-term business strategies and are hesitant to hire beyond family members [16,55].

However, studies have also found that lifestyle entrepreneurs play a crucial role in developing and introducing innovative products in niche markets that have been underexplored in rural areas. This activity stimulates local economies and reinforces values related to sustainability, community, and a sense of place [56,57]. These also indicate that immigrants often possess a unique sensitivity towards local cultural and landscape resources, which may be a significant factor in their decision to move to rural areas [58,59]. As a result, lifestyle entrepreneurs might be more likely than long-term local residents to recognize the potential of local culture, landscapes, and nature as viable tourism products and, in doing so, identify business opportunities [54,60]. In other words, these immigrants

often contribute to the multifunctionality of rural areas by diversifying their economy through businesses in tourism, hospitality, and services.

Following this last idea, regions with diversified economies generally find themselves better positioned for resilience and growth. Successful rural areas frequently leverage local resources (e.g., unique agricultural products, natural landscapes, or renewable energy potential) to create sustainable job opportunities. They may also attract niche markets, like agritourism or local crafts, which provide additional economic strength [61,62]. On the other hand, rural areas highly dependent on a single industry struggle with economic stagnation, face population loss, and restricted capacity for economic growth and diversity [63], leading to a decline in local social capital and civic engagement [64]. To counter this trend, attracting new residents and encouraging economic diversification are essential for driving local development, particularly by capitalizing on the unique dynamics of border regions. This approach remains relevant even though border regions are among the least economically diversified areas in Europe and often face significant depopulation [4,5].

From a deterministic geographical perspective, borders are viewed as barriers to economic efficiency, increasing interaction costs and disrupting activity flows [65]. Conversely, some argue that border regions present opportunities for innovative development, aligning with successive EU programmes aimed at fostering cross-border cooperation [66]. Complementing these perspectives, constructivist theory sees borders and border regions as social constructs where identity is continuously negotiated. This approach considers the psychological, social, historical, and cultural factors that define a community, shaping “mental distances” that are constantly created and reshaped [67]. Regardless of the theoretical lens, it is evident that the local government framework of a given border region plays a crucial role in shaping local development, with the potential to either facilitate or hinder economic progress and social well-being [68,69].

Building on the existing literature, this article explores the role of immigrants in driving economic growth, strengthening the foundation for future generations, and improving social welfare in two rural Spanish border regions: Sayago and Ribagorza. Sayago has experienced continuous population decline in recent decades, while Ribagorza has seen a modest demographic recovery, largely fuelled by international immigration. Another key distinction lies in the nature of the border itself. The Pyrenees create a landscape of isolation and discontinuity, particularly in their central region, acting as a true physical barrier. In contrast, Sayago sits along a more porous and accessible border with Portugal, where tourism and commercial initiatives have flourished across the region [70]. However, proximity to Portugal has not halted the trend of depopulation.

In summary, the article analyses the demographic and economic structures of both regions, highlighting the role of immigrants in counteracting depopulation and diversifying the local economy of the two border regions. Before presenting the results, the following section delves into the methodology underlying the project that informs the findings of this paper.

3. Sources and Methods

This paper compares patterns of immigration and local development in two areas in Spain: Ribagorza, in northern Spain, in the Pyrenees (province of Huesca), and Sayago in western Spain, close to the Portuguese border (province of Zamora) (see Figure 1 for location). These regions were carefully chosen for three research projects on which this article is based (For more information, see the following project websites SURDIM: <https://atlantis.uab.cat/hamlets/en/index.html> (accessed on 30 January 2025). ELDEMOR:

<https://eldemor.es/en> (accessed on 11 March 2025). RE-PLACE: <https://replace-horizon.eu> (accessed on 5 March 2025).

The first project, SURDIM, was a European-funded initiative focused on mountain rural areas, selecting the Pyrenees as a case study. Within the Pyrenees, Ribagorza illustrates the complexities of mountain regions in Spain, featuring a diverse economy that blends traditional farming with active tourism and skiing. Meanwhile, the ELDEMOR project, a Spanish-led study on rural areas in Portugal and Spain, shares its study area—the Sayago region in Zamora—with REPLACE, an EU-funded project on left-behind areas, those experiencing decline or stagnation in economic, demographic, and social dimensions. Sayago indeed was selected based on a local development index at the municipal level, where it emerged as a prominent left-behind region. This index was applied to measure development at the local level (LAUs) in the European Union, using the concept of community capitals (material, socio-human, and health capitals) [71].

Being both left-behind areas in border regions, the significance of this comparison stems from their contrasting economic and demographic trends: Ribagorza has recently experienced economic revitalization, attracting foreign-born residents, while Sayago faces a sluggish economy, depopulation, and an ageing population, as will be discussed later. The analysis will ultimately allow us to derive insights into the factors influencing successful or unsuccessful local development experiences in rural border regions of Spain, with a particular focus on the role of immigrant entrepreneurship and local governance initiatives.

The methodological framework is guided by a phenomenological approach and qualitative analysis, using interviews with key informants and immigrants. Additionally, those projects incorporated official statistics—mainly Census data and Continuous Population Registers—offering insights into the total population of these areas, including individuals born abroad and those with foreign nationality.

Regarding qualitative data, 32 semi-structured in-depth interviews were carried out with immigrants across the two study areas, with 16 interviews conducted in each region. Additionally, a total of seven semi-structured interviews were conducted with key informants in each region, including mayors, representatives of entrepreneurs' associations, and local action group officials involved in managing European Union funds.

The selection of interviewees followed a snowball sampling technique. Initially, local public administrations and entrepreneurial associations were contacted to identify foreign-born immigrants residing in the respective areas. Subsequently, previously interviewed immigrants facilitated the referral of additional potential research participants. Gender balance was sought among the informants, even though women outnumbered men in the non-representative sample survey. Additionally, the interviewees spanned different age groups, leading to a wide spectrum of labour integration experiences among immigrants, with an average age group of 45–49. Of the non-representative survey, nearly two-thirds consisted of entrepreneurs and self-employed workers. In the case of Ribagorza, the majority of these individuals were originally from Central and Western Europe, with a smaller portion originating from Latin America and Eastern Europe. For Sayago, entrepreneurs were equally distributed between internal and international immigrants, originally from Europe and Latin America. Although the survey was not representative of the immigrant groups in the studied regions, the interviews achieved a level of saturation, where informants' responses no longer introduced new information, themes, or insights.

In both cases—immigrants and key informants—the average interview duration was approximately one hour, and they were conducted at a location and time convenient for

the interviewee. All were recorded and transcribed in full. Participants were also assured that the data collected would be anonymized and, consequently, all the names used in the article are pseudonyms. The analysis of the interview data followed a content analysis method, which involved several stages. Initially, codes were established and organized in alignment with specific interview sections. Subsequently, utilizing the MAXQDA2020 software, the interviews were labelled, and relevant extracts were grouped into distinct topics. Finally, a systematic review and analysis of this information facilitated the abstraction process and the selection of pertinent quotations to illustrate the analysis.

4. Results

4.1. Demographic Trends: Contrasting Migration Profiles

The two study regions share common trends concerning settlement, since both of them are basically rural areas and their population is highly dispersed in the territory. Thus, in Ribagorza (Huesca), only two municipalities (out of 34) have more than 2000 inhabitants in 2021. In Sayago (Zamora), all municipalities are considered to be rural, since none of the 24 exceeds 2000 inhabitants. However, concerning population trends, the declining population trend in Sayago is clear over the last 20 years, dropping from 9775 in 2001 to 6986 in 2021, but this is not the case in Ribagorza, which shows some population recovery. In the period of 2001–2011, the annual growth for Ribagorza was positive (1% annual), even if this trend reversed in the subsequent decade. In any case, the population has slightly recovered in this *comarca* due to the arrival of international immigrants, with the foreign population representing 13.3% of the total population of Ribagorza (similar to the Spanish average). By contrast, foreigners only account for a scarce 4.2% in Sayago. According to Census data, both counties experienced similar trends concerning ageing, with the percentage of people aged 65 years old standing as high as 44.2% for Sayago (Table 1).

Table 1. Demography of the study areas.

	Ribagorza	Sayago	Spain
Population 2001	11,792	9775	40,847,371
Population 2011	13,036	8593	46,815,916
Population 2021	12,422	6986	47,400,798
Annual growth rate 01–11 (%)	1.0	−1.3	1.4
Annual growth rate 11–21 (%)	−0.3	−2.1	0.1
% Foreign population (2001)	1.7	0.5	3.3
% Foreign population (2021)	13.3	4.2	13.5
% Population 65 and more (2021)	23.4	44.2	19.6

Source: Authors from [72].

The significant difference in the type of immigration these two areas attract is essential for understanding the variations in population dynamics. This is closely tied to the local economic foundation. Over the past two decades, rural tourism has experienced significant growth across Spain due to the LEADER funds for rural tourism development [73], while farming activities have declined. In this context, international immigrants have actively contributed to tourism entrepreneurship in certain left-behind rural regions of Spain. Recognizing the potential of landscapes, nature, and local culture, they have played a key role in establishing businesses and transforming these resources into sustainable and profitable ventures [74].

4.2. Immigrant Business: Creating New Economic Avenues in Border Regions

A central question of the article is whether immigrants, both domestic and international, can establish businesses that create stable economic opportunities for the future and potentially retain and attract new residents. Initially, one might assume that interviewees were financially well-off, so they could start a business. However, upon delving into their narratives, it becomes evident that business success is a consequence of a long process that might rely on other sources of income. In other words, it is compulsory for households to have sufficient savings to cover losses during the initial years of the business, or eventually diversify their income sources, to allow the business to operate with initial financial losses as it gains momentum. The example of Paula (all names provided here are not real names for anonymity reasons), born in Madrid and living in Sayago for more than 20 years, exemplifies this:

“This was a family home. I inherited it from my great-grandfather, who was from Sayago. But restoring it took a lot of effort from both my husband and me. He worked in a health centre and never left his job. When I started the jam business, I had to buy everything from scratch, set up the shop, and apply for permits... it was challenging, and we had to invest in equipment and training. I received European funding through the local business action group, but I’m running the business on my own, and without my husband’s steady income, it would have been impossible to make it work.” (Spanish female, 60, Sayago).

Similarly to Paula, and as a general rule, entrepreneurs interviewed in the study areas shared that they tend to be self-employed workers, or establish small, family-run businesses, often without hired employees. This pattern has been widely documented in the literature on lifestyle entrepreneurs [53,75].

More relevant than the size of the business is the fact that immigrants are indeed driving innovation within traditional sectors in rural Spain. This applies in both areas. The first example comes from a rural lodge in Sayago that now offers workshops on Peruvian cuisine, and the second is a rafting company in Ribagorza that manufactures its own equipment. Rural tourism and rafting are well-established industries in both regions. In Sayago, there are a total of 28 official rural lodges, with some key informants noting that the market is oversaturated and affected by low professionalism among operators. In Ribagorza, the Campo municipality alone hosts seven companies offering rafting services. However, the added value comes from the new residents who bring fresh perspectives, revitalizing existing businesses and possibly enhancing job opportunities in the area.

“I came straight to (name of the municipality) from Argentina on my first trip to Europe as a rafting instructor. I came for seasonal work and arrived with my boyfriend, who’s now my husband. I fell in love with this area for its tranquillity, with mountains and the river nearby, much like my homeland. For eight years, I alternated seasons between here and Argentina. Then, I started a business similar to the one I had in Argentina. Since we couldn’t find life jackets, we decided to make them ourselves. My husband, who’s very skilled, created a prototype that initially didn’t work, but eventually succeeded, and soon everyone in rafting in the area was using our life jackets (...) The municipality has provided us with a space, and our plan is to train one or two workers in sewing to help grow the business.” (Argentinean female, 33, Ribagorza).

“The rural lodge started with four rooms 20 years ago, and we saw an opportunity to open a restaurant that also served breakfast to our guests. Later, we established the

restaurant itself, but we operated by reservation only. Given our somewhat remote location, it really functions as an on-demand restaurant for both hotel guests and external customers (...) We also started baking organic bread, which we sell in the village (...) Since I'm Peruvian, I incorporate traditional dishes from my homeland as starters, keeping it simple. We even organized a Peruvian cuisine week, which was very successful (...) Everything we offer is made from organic products—eggs, suckling lamb, and more.” (Peruvian female, 60, Sayago).

Immigrant entrepreneurs also play a key role in the creation and introduction of innovative products into very specific market niches that had been underexplored in rural areas. As examples, the research interviewed Márcia, a Brazilian national who works on cultural activities in a previously abandoned hamlet in Ribagorza, and Michel, a retired French immigrant who has recovered the saffron production on a very scarcely inhabited locality also in the same *comarca*. Another initiative is the case of the business developed by Dutch immigrants in a scarcely inhabited Huesca village, which has progressively expanded to a restaurant, a travel agency, and a small camping area. This young couple passed from being the only workers to employing one person permanently and two more temporarily in the summer season. They also use a wide local social network to create tailor-made tourist packages that are mainly oriented to Dutch tourists (Figure 3).



Figure 3. Village in Ribagorza. Immigrant business. Old school building restored as a restaurant and travel agency managed by Dutch immigrants. Source: Authors.

All these examples illustrate how businesses run by immigrants in small villages have opportunities to grow and diversify their profitable activities over time. This is because they are capable of creating social networks in the territory, and, in the last case, using, at the same time, links with the country of origin. In the case of Sayago, we also found that immigrants have been very active in creating a network of businesses along the territory to promote local products and find synergies between tourism and farming. Thus, under the *Arribes. Ruta del Vino* (Arribes. Wine Route) brand, various local

restaurants, wineries, and farm producers (e.g., cheeses) showcase their offerings along a designated route through the region (Figure 4). A local craftswoman (originally from Madrid) created a small plaque with a logo, which made the businesses collaborating on this initiative recognizable.



Figure 4. “Arribes. Ruta del vino” (Arribes. Wine route). Source: Authors.

Social capital then emerges as the most potent competitive advantage for immigrant entrepreneurs, demonstrating their ability to initiate and expand businesses in rural environments [76]. It encompasses various dimensions, comprising both immigrant community networks, which may have domestic, binational, or transnational links, and those formed by immigrants within local settings. The interviewees weave a dense network of local connections while maintaining ties to their home countries, as exemplified by the Dutch couple who own a travel agency in Ribagorza.

It is also worth noting that, for the majority of those interviewed, business, social life, and, eventually, friendships are interconnected. This is a crucial aspect to consider when relocating to and settling in Spanish rural areas and aligns with observations in the literature on lifestyle immigrants [77,78]. Our fieldwork also reveals a heightened sensitivity to local identities and nature among immigrants, which contributes to the development of a personal sense of belonging, subsequently reinforcing a broader sense of community in rural settings [57]. Take the example of a cultural initiative led by Márcia, a Brazilian national, in a small village in Ribagorza, which is divided into two small hamlets. While a few local families persist in the lower mountain, the abandoned hamlet uphill has been revitalized by an international group comprising individuals from various origins.

“We have a vibrant collaboration with Graus (Ribagorza’s capital). We actively participated in the local theatre festival (...) In our home, we have an outdoor theatre, and presently, we are refurbishing an old cellar to create a more intimate setting—an indoor theatre for around 30 people (...) It’s truly charming: from the outdoor theatre, there’s a delightful view of the mountains. People appreciate it (...) We organized workshops for children (...) Our intention is not to isolate ourselves from the community. We established an association to cultivate stronger connections with the downtown village. Even elderly residents living downhill have made the journey up to attend our performances.”
(Brazilian female, 62, Ribagorza)

Márcia actively participates in the local community, guided by a distinct sense of community that is closely intertwined with the very survival of the locality, and by integrating her knowledge into local practices, this interviewee has shown great local resilience [79]. Related to this idea, there is a clear difference between the broadness of cultural activities in the two study areas. For Sayago, these are largely connected to local celebrations and the seasonal return of emigrants during holiday periods. In Ribagorza, cultural activities have a more stable platform and more local support, and immigrants are involved in activities which go beyond the strictly local perspective (exhibitions, theatre, language learning). All of this may be essential in fostering a strong sense of place within communities, ultimately contributing to their survival and growth. A significant factor influencing the differing approaches to cultural activities is the border effect and local governance, which set distinct priorities in each territory. The following sections delve deeper into these aspects.

4.3. The Border Effects: Work, Tourism, and Trade Through Borders

Physical connectivity has long been a major concern for rural areas in Spain [80], though its impact on retaining population remains debatable. In border regions, the road network plays a crucial role in overcoming physical barriers, directly influencing connectivity with neighbouring countries and shaping cross-border movements. When road infrastructure successfully bridges these barriers, mobility increases, fostering synergies in employment and service provision for residents of adjacent regions.

This is evident in Sayago, where the integration of Spanish and Portuguese road networks facilitates the movement of workers, business customers, and tourists who potentially explore and appreciate the natural and scenic heritage of the region. These interactions strengthen a shared identity shaped by historical isolation and longstanding cross-border communication. This cross-border dynamic is particularly significant in the healthcare sector. The demand for healthcare and caregiving professionals for the region's ageing population is so high that it is partially met by Portuguese workers. Nurses and doctors commute from nearby border towns, drawn by higher wages in Spain. This is the case of Sara, who lives in Miranda do Douro (Trás-os-Montes) and works part-time at two nursing homes in Sayago. She also covers sick leave positions occasionally in other municipalities of the Zamora province, as the system operates at the provincial level, but only if the job is within a 30 min drive from her home. According to her words: "I oversee the nursing homes in Muga and Villar del Buey, both located in Sayago, Spain, while residing in Miranda, Portugal, just a 20-min drive away. Like me, many others commute daily from Portugal to work in these facilities, drawn by the slightly higher wages here" (Portuguese female, 48, Sayago). This highlights the importance of roads and private transportation, which, based on fieldwork in the region, are generally of good quality—a view shared by most interviewees.

The border also influences the availability of commercial facilities in Sayago. Miranda do Douro serves as the primary shopping hub for residents in the western part of the region, where lower prices in Portugal have fostered the growth of restaurants and supermarkets catering to local demand. As noted by an interviewee who splits his time between Sayago (in a municipality near the Portuguese border) and Madrid: "When I'm in Sayago, I often shop in Miranda do Douro and eat out at its restaurants". (Spanish male, 64, Sayago). As a result, only a few small local supermarkets remain in Sayago. In Fermoselle (the most populated town in the area, close to the Portuguese border), the last surviving supermarket continues to operate thanks to Venezuelan immigrants who took over after

the previous owners retired. In contrast, the eastern part of Sayago gravitates more towards Zamora city for commercial needs.

The border location has also played a key role in the success of certain nature tourism businesses, exemplified by the Duero-Douro International Biological Station (EBI). Founded by a non-local Spaniard, EBI is a binational centre for research, technological innovation, environmental education, and biodiversity studies in the Arribes del Duero. It successfully integrates natural conservation with the promotion of sustainable ecotourism [81], and benefits from the support of both the Spanish and Portuguese Ministries of Foreign Affairs. According to a key spokesperson at the EBI:

“The Duero-Douro International Biological Station operates in a shared territory. In 2002, two private companies—one Spanish (Europarques España) and one Portuguese (Centro de Turismo Ambiental Luso-Espanhol)—officially established the Station to support the environmental conservation of the Arribes del Duero.” (Spanish male, 58, Sayago).

Ribagorza, on the other hand, does not experience this border-driven economic dynamic, as the Pyrenees act as a natural barrier. There is no direct physical connection to France, as plans for a Benasque-Luchon tunnel were met with strong opposition from environmental groups. Yet the attraction of immigration and businesses driven by immigrants share similarities with patterns observed in other areas of the Pyrenees, where connectivity with France is ensured through land routes and key infrastructure such as the Somport and Bielsa tunnels in the central regions of the mountain range [76].

The physical barrier, however, hinders cross-border collaboration projects in Ribagorza, which is coordinated through the European Grouping of Territorial Cooperation (EGTC) “Pirineos-Pyrénées”, covering the entire Huesca province. Established in 2020, key informants interviewed in Ribagorza did not identify it as a leading organization for local development. In contrast, the “Douro-Duero” EGTC, created in 2009, is highly active in advancing an agenda for self-sustained energy communities on both sides of the border, apart from promoting economic activities, such as wine production and tourism linked with winemakers. This is explained by a key individual responsible for this EGTC:

“We established Efiduero Energy as an energy cooperative (...) In 2019, we launched a pilot project for shared self-consumption, implementing it in a specific municipality to assess the model’s viability. The goal was to determine whether energy production through photovoltaic panels installed on municipal rooftops would be sufficient, given that many villages have underutilized infrastructure. The pilot project proved successful, and in 2021, we began the first phase of shared self-consumption with 40 installations. By 2024, we had expanded to 106 facilities. Our cooperative model allows any individual, municipality and company to become a member, provided they reside within the operational area of the EGTC.” (Spanish female, 32, Sayago)

Beyond these locally based projects, large hydroelectric companies in Sayago and Ribagorza generate substantial amounts of electricity for urban areas through an extensive network of dams and reservoirs. In Sayago, the Duero River hosts dams evenly distributed between both countries and there has been no unanimous response to these large-scale energy projects. In contrast, Ribagorza has faced strong opposition to these projects, which are viewed as enterprises that provide no local benefits and serve solely to supply energy to urban centres outside the region. For instance, a local mayor in Ribagorza strongly opposed the large-scale expansion of energy projects in the region. He criticized

the extractive model, emphasizing that energy production does not translate into local benefits such as price reductions or fiscal incentives. In his own words:

“In the 1980 s, the most fertile agricultural lands were sacrificed for the construction of hydroelectric dams. In Ribagorza, the electricity generated is sent to Barcelona. Now, there is growing pressure to cover our land with solar panels. Despite producing more energy through renewable sources than we actually consume, we still pay the same rates as everyone else. We have passed a resolution banning the installation of large photovoltaic farms in our municipality, allowing solar energy only for individual consumption. Several companies have shown interest, but my response has been a firm NO, despite their persistence and generous financial offers. However, I have no doubt that they will eventually succeed with other mayors, as they offer substantial amounts of money.” (Spanish male, 62, Ribagorza).

In summary, border regions in Spain experience varying economic and social dynamics influenced by their physical connectivity. In Sayago, the integration of Spanish and Portuguese infrastructure facilitates cross-border movement, fostering employment, commerce, and nature tourism while also addressing local labour shortages, particularly in healthcare. The economic interdependence with Portugal has strengthened historical ties and somehow shaped regional identity. Conversely, Ribagorza, hindered by the natural barrier of the Pyrenees, lacks direct connectivity with France, limiting cross-border exchanges. While immigration and business trends in Ribagorza resemble those in other better-connected Pyrenean regions, transborder local collaboration efforts remain weaker. Additionally, while both regions host large-scale energy projects, Sayago exhibits a mixed response, whereas Ribagorza strongly opposes such initiatives due to perceived economic disadvantages. These contrasting dynamics highlight the critical role of infrastructure in shaping regional development and cross-border interactions.

4.4. Local Governance: Making the Difference Across Regions

Building on the previous section, local governance is essential in leveraging local resources, attracting businesses, and activating local social capital, all of which contribute to economic development. Especially in highly decentralized countries like Spain, the structure and functions of local administrations differ from one region to another. This arises as the first issue to consider when examining whether communities have a voice in the planning and implementation of local projects. Local governments, as the closest level of administration to citizens, play a key role in this regard. In Spain, particularly in the northern regions, municipalities tend to be small and operate with limited resources. This is true for both Ribagorza and Sayago. Ribagorza consists of 34 municipalities spread across nearly 2500 km² (with Graus, the largest, having 3380 inhabitants in 2024), while Sayago includes 24 municipalities across 1487 km² (with Fermoselle being the most populated, with 1149 inhabitants in 2024) [72].

Local efforts may then be limited by the small size of municipalities and unequal power dynamics with external administrative bodies. However, Ribagorza has an extra-municipal entity, known as a *consejo comarcal* (county council). This institutional structure at the local supra-municipal level is shaped by Aragón’s regional policy, which defines the *comarca*’s powers to promote, at least in theory, local development. In contrast, Sayago lacks such an entity, as the regional government of Castilla y León does not have this institutional framework. According to some key informants interviewed in Sayago, even

cross-border funds are managed by Valladolid, the distant regional capital, which does not share a physical border with Portugal.

Local initiatives in the Ribagorza *comarca* have not yet focused on implementing governance practices; they instead follow a more traditional top-down approach that mirrors the logic of higher-level administrations (regional and national). However, local leaders have acknowledged the shortage of socio-sanitary personnel and have acted by introducing a specialized training course in social services and establishing an effective caregiving network throughout the region. This is particularly crucial in areas with a high proportion of elderly residents. In the case of Sayago, these initiatives have not been necessary due to the availability of Portuguese caregivers who commute daily. Nevertheless, these policies play a vital role in providing essential safety nets and support for vulnerable populations, ensuring they are included in regional development. Notably, in Ribagorza, several interviewed immigrant women have taken on these caregiving roles.

At another level of local administration, provinces in Spain are provided with an institutional framework designed primarily to support small municipalities, often supplying services that these municipalities cannot provide on their own, such as waste collection. Provincial *diputaciones* (provincial councils) typically benefit from a stable budget directly allocated by the central government. In both Huesca and Zamora, provincial authorities have been actively promoting the expansion of digital cable connections within their territories. Interviewees noted that while this initiative has been successful—albeit delayed—it has had little impact on attracting or retaining population (e.g., digital nomads). For example, one interviewee from Madrid, who relocated with his wife to a small municipality in Sayago, experienced years of poor and unreliable digital connections until recent improvements were made. In his words:

“Fiber internet arrived two months ago, and we’ve been living here for 17 years. (...) The roads are fine. You wouldn’t believe the high-end cars you see on them. But Internet? It was never a priority. We asked for it, but no one listened. They offered courses on web design or programs for rural women, but without Internet, can you believe that? In the beginning, I had to contract a Portuguese company, and I’d often drive closer to the Portuguese border just to catch the aerial signal from there to send my work. (...) I’m a graphic designer.” (Spanish male, 53, Sayago).

The institutional framework is undoubtedly crucial for fostering economic growth at the local level. In Spain, this is exemplified by the Local Action Groups, which are established at a sub-regional level to manage LEADER funds. These groups are intended to support entrepreneurship, facilitate access to finance, and promote education and skill development. In practice, their activities are often limited to small-scale repairs, primarily in the retail, restaurant, and hotel sectors, as well as the purchase of machinery and equipment. Their efficiency largely depends on how active the groups are in navigating a bureaucratic landscape marked by complex EU requirements, which the local population is often ill-equipped to handle. As one entrepreneur from Sayago noted, these funds tend to be directed toward larger companies with trained staff capable of managing the administrative burden, especially when Local Action Groups are pressured to allocate the funds before the fiscal year ends. Overall, the effectiveness of these groups heavily depends on the personal commitment and initiative of the professionals managing them.

Despite their important role, institutional frameworks can pose challenges to local development, especially when they are weak or inefficient. Their effectiveness in retaining or attracting new residents is often limited. In this regard, Ribagorza has implemented targeted, structured responses to local needs, which have successfully contributed to the

creation of a county-based network of health and caregiving professionals. This initiative has been instrumental in bringing in foreign-born professionals to the area, helping to slow down depopulation to some extent. In Sayago, two local initiatives aimed at attracting immigrants have yielded contrasting results—one unsuccessful and the other proving effective. The first effort, led by the Fermoselle municipal government, involved providing facilities for Ukrainian refugees; however, only three families arrived, and all left after a short stay. In contrast, a collaboration between the same municipal government and a private association successfully facilitated the relocation of several Venezuelan families, who have since remained in the community. This is evident in the following testimony from a key informant:

“Fermoselle welcomed three Ukrainian families who had fled from the war. [...] However, they left the municipality abruptly. You can’t force people to stay if they choose otherwise. More recently, 50 Venezuelans arrived simultaneously through a collaboration with a privately run, church-supported Venezuelan association. We assisted them in securing jobs and housing. This is a unique case in Sayago.” (Spanish male, 68, Sayago).

Local governance plays a fundamental role in shaping local development by mobilizing resources, attracting businesses, and fostering social capital. However, its effectiveness varies across regions, as seen in Ribagorza and Sayago. While Ribagorza benefits from a *comarca*-level administrative structure that facilitates regional coordination, Sayago operates within a more fragmented governance system, with decisions often managed at the distant regional level. Despite these challenges, Ribagorza has implemented structured initiatives, particularly in the healthcare and caregiving sectors, which have helped attract immigrant workers and address local needs. In Sayago, immigration initiatives have had mixed results, with some, like the collaboration with a Venezuelan association, proving more sustainable than others. Additionally, despite efforts by provincial authorities to improve digital infrastructure, connectivity issues have hindered economic opportunities in rural areas. Ultimately, the success of local development initiatives depends not only on institutional structures but also on proactive leadership, efficient governance, and the ability to adapt policies to the specific needs of each community.

5. Discussion

The findings of this study highlight the contrasting demographic and economic trajectories of two rural Spanish regions, Ribagorza and Sayago. While both regions share common characteristics, such as a predominantly rural landscape and dispersed population, their demographic trends and capacity to attract immigrants differ significantly. Ribagorza has demonstrated a modest capacity for population recovery, primarily due to international immigration, whereas Sayago continues to experience significant population decline. This divergence underscores the critical role that immigration, particularly international migration, plays in shaping rural demographic trends in Spain [6,7].

The differences in migration patterns are closely tied to the economic structures of the two regions. The growth of rural tourism in Ribagorza has provided opportunities for immigrant entrepreneurship, allowing new residents to engage in business ventures that capitalize on local natural and cultural resources. This phenomenon aligns with broader trends observed in Spain (and elsewhere in Europe), where international immigrants have been active in revitalizing rural areas through entrepreneurial initiatives [9,53,54]. Conversely, Sayago has been less successful in attracting international immigrants, which is

reflected in its lower percentage of foreign-born residents. However, it does exhibit an entrepreneurial network, mainly fueled by non-locals that promote synergies between tourism and farming, demonstrating an alternative path to rural economic revitalization.

Immigrant entrepreneurship emerges as a key factor in rural economic development, with new residents introducing innovative business models and diversifying local economies. The case studies presented in this research illustrate how small-scale, immigrant-led businesses contribute to economic resilience, in line with other case studies in Europe. Whether through niche market activities, such as Peruvian cuisine workshops in Sayago or the expansion of nature-based tourism services in Ribagorza, these initiatives demonstrate the potential of immigrant entrepreneurship to enhance rural livelihoods. Moreover, in line with the literature, our results show that the ability of immigrant entrepreneurs to establish and maintain social networks—both locally and transnationally—has been crucial in ensuring the sustainability of their businesses [69,79]. The Dutch-owned travel agency in Ribagorza exemplifies this, leveraging transnational ties to attract Dutch tourists to the region.

The role of borders in shaping local economic and social dynamics is another critical finding of this study. Sayago, situated near the Spanish–Portuguese border, benefits from cross-border labour mobility, trade, and tourism. The integration of road networks facilitates employment opportunities for Portuguese workers in Sayago’s healthcare sector and enhances commercial interactions, as demonstrated by the preference of some Sayago residents to shop in Miranda do Douro. This border effect has strengthened economic interdependencies and helped sustain essential services in the region. In contrast, Ribagorza’s geographical isolation due to the Pyrenees limits cross-border exchanges, reducing opportunities for similar economic synergies with France.

Local governance structures further influence the effectiveness of rural development strategies. Ribagorza benefits from a *comarca*-level administrative framework, which provides an additional layer of coordination for regional initiatives. This structure has facilitated targeted responses to local challenges, such as the creation of a caregiving network to address the needs of an ageing population. Sayago, in contrast, lacks a *comarca* institution, and decision-making authority is concentrated at the distant regional level in Valladolid. This governance disparity has practical implications, particularly in accessing and managing development funds. While Local Action Groups in both regions play a role in channelling EU LEADER funds, our results clearly point out that their effectiveness is often constrained by bureaucratic complexities, limiting their impact on fostering entrepreneurship and retaining population. This should be a priority for local and regional political institutions in Spain.

6. Conclusions

The findings of this study highlight the complex interplay of demographic and economic factors shaping rural Spain. Examining the two left-behind rural areas selected reveals that immigration, entrepreneurship, border dynamics, and governance structures collectively influence the resilience and growth of these regions. Among these factors, immigration emerges as the key driver of local economic and social development, with immigrants playing a crucial role through entrepreneurial initiatives. Equally significant is the commitment of local governance, which, when supported by a decentralized administrative framework, enables authorities to implement their own economic and social initiatives. Additionally, the impact of border locations varies depending on the physical geography of the region—crossing a riverbed poses a far smaller challenge than surmounting a 3000 m elevation, as illustrated by the two case studies examined.

Nonetheless, when cross-border interactions are feasible, they generate positive effects by facilitating labour mobility, tourism, and trade, ultimately enhancing the well-being of the connected areas.

Therefore, Ribagorza's relative success in maintaining population levels and fostering business innovation highlights the importance of immigrant attraction and supportive local governance. Sayago's continued depopulation, despite active local business networks and cross-border linkages, suggests that additional policy interventions are needed to enhance its attractiveness for new residents. Strengthening governance, enhancing economic opportunities, and leveraging border advantages where possible will be essential for sustaining these rural communities in the long term.

Future research should explore immigration and population growth trends, the long-term sustainability of the entrepreneurial initiatives and examine the potential for policy frameworks that can better support rural economic revitalization in Spain's left-behind areas.

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