



Rural areas face the economic crisis: Analyzing the determinants of successful territorial dynamics



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ABSTRACT

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This paper aims to identify the factors that have determined successful territorial dynamics (STD) in rural areas of Andalusia during economic expansion periods, and analyzes their stability in the current context of economic crisis. In order to do so, we have designed a methodology that, on the one hand, identifies STD using data envelopment analysis (DEA), and on the other, determines the impact of a wide range of territorial variables that define the aforementioned dynamics. The results highlight how different aspects of economic, human, natural, and social capital such as economic diversification (rural tourism), agriculture (CAP funding, young farmers, organic production), access to services (infrastructures and facilities), demographics (foreign population), natural resources (Natura 2000), and governance (rural development funding management) can drive STD in rural areas. While the stability of some of these factors is being threatened by the impacts of the crisis, the stability of others turned out to be less affected and even enhanced. Rural territories, that have based their development on these latter stable factors, are better prepared to face the consequences of the crisis. These territories could be a priori considered as pre-resilient territories, able to develop and deploy new resources and capacities, which enable them to prepare favorably to the dynamics of change driven by the aforementioned crisis. This study is especially valuable since the results obtained could provide useful information for policymakers in the design of public policies, allowing rural areas to respond more favorably to the current economic crisis.

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1. Introduction

Despite public policy attempts to improve socioeconomic cohesion and environmental sustainability in European territories, the strategic goal approved by the European Council in Lisbon (2000) and Gothenburg (2001), the reality of rural areas in Europe exhibits numerous and important territorial imbalances on varying levels and of many different types (EC, 2010a). The permanent nature of these regional disparities, which have increased since the recent EU expansion, and the need to move towards territorial convergence, have motivated the inclusion of the principle of territorial cohesion in EU objectives (art. 158 of the Treaty of Lisbon). As a result, territorial cohesion has become a relevant issue in the

current EU political agenda, and a top priority in the legislative proposals for cohesion policy for the period 2014–2020 (EC, 2011). Currently, fundamental questions are being asked about the direction the future territorial development policy should take; a policy that will undoubtedly be marked by the 2014–2020 financial prospects and the foreseeable medium to long term impact of the current economic crisis, as well as the future EU growth strategy “Europe 2020”.³

In this context of territorial imbalances, it is evident that European rural areas do not evolve homogeneously, thus confirming the existence of diverse territorial dynamics. The concept of rural territorial dynamics refers to the processes of development in the socioeconomic structure, institutional framework and environmental capital of rural areas, and the changes that accompany the effects of development (RIMISP, 2007; Hamdouch, 2010). In this respect, it could be said that two types of rural areas coexist within

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³ Europe 2020: A strategy for smart, sustainable and inclusive growth. COM (20190) 2010. Brussels: European Commission.

the EU: those with development dynamics defined by strong economic growth, social cohesion and environmental sustainability, and those in which economic stagnation, depopulation and environmental degradation persist. This diversity can also be observed in the factors that determine these situations and in the diverse territorial responses to the policies that affect them.

In recent years, the increasing intensity of the changes and the diversity of the dynamics that are taking place in rural areas have highlighted the need to conduct research that can address the intellectual and political challenges arising as a result of these issues. As a consequence, several projects have attempted to distinguish between “leading” and “lagging” rural areas in order to compare their characteristics and determine the factors that might explain these different processes of change. Some of the most important projects in Europe include the Study on Employment, Growth and Innovation in Rural Areas (SEGIRA) (EC, 2010b), European Development Opportunities for Rural Areas (EDORA) (Copus et al., 2011), and Dynamics of Rural Areas (DORAS) (Bryden and Hart, 2001). Beyond European borders, one of the most important projects in Latin America is the Rural Territorial Dynamics Project (RIMISP, 2007). In this same line, several authors have tried to identify key factors that influence the dynamics of territorial development from an economic (Terluin, 2003; Bryden et al., 2004; Agarwal et al., 2009), social (Putnam, 1993; Whiteley, 2000; Nelson and Sampat, 2001; Kahila et al., 2009; Hamdouch, 2010) and environmental perspective (Hoggart et al., 1995; Courtney et al., 2006; Langlais and Tepecik Dis, 2009). However, despite all these studies, there is still a lack of knowledge of the underlying factors that explain the successful territorial dynamics across rural Spain, and of the most appropriate mechanisms and policies to foster improvements.

Furthermore, it should be noted that debates on territorial development no longer focus exclusively on growth, but aim to cover and analyze another type of phenomenon: territorial resilience or response to external changes or “shocks” (Hill et al., 2008). In this respect, one of the major external factors that determine diverse rural and urban territorial dynamics, while at the same time generating a powerful shock, is the aforementioned economic crisis that is currently shaking up most of Europe. The variety of effects resulting from recent crises has been documented previously (see, for example, Fallon and Lucas, 2002; Trivelli et al., 2009). To understand the effects of the crisis some authors have used an analytical approach based on the concept of territorial resilience (Ashby et al., 2009; Wells, 2009; Batty and Cole, 2010). Generally speaking, territorial resilience refers to the capacity of certain territories (cities, regions, rural areas, etc.) to prepare, resist or adapt to situations of shock (economic, financial, social or political crises; natural, ecological, industrial or epidemiological disasters; climate change; technological change, etc.) that affect the core elements of the territory, people and their activities (companies, institutions, markets, structures, sectors, etc.) (Hamdouch et al., 2012).

In the rural context, the concept of resilience has been used from the perspective of complex socioecological systems and sustainable development to address several specific issues pertaining to rural areas (Walker et al., 2004; Stayner, 2005; Plummer and Armitage, 2007; Nkhata et al., 2008; Van der Ploeg and Marsden, 2008; Wilson, 2010; McManus et al., 2012; Schouten et al., 2012). However, the concept of resilience has not been widely applied to rural areas from an integrated and territorial perspective that takes into account economic, social and environmental dimensions. Research on territorial resilience has focused mainly on urban areas and, in some cases, very large territorial areas (regions), with very few existing studies focusing on other types of territories (Pike et al., 2010). In a situation of economic crisis, it is more appropriate to use a conceptual framework of resilience to analyze territorial

dynamics in rural areas given the potential impact such a study could have on the design of subsequent policies.

This paper aims to identify the factors that have determined successful territorial dynamics (STD) in rural areas during economic expansion periods and analyzes their stability in the context of economic crisis in order to provide useful information for policy-makers to design public policies, which, in turn, could allow rural territories to respond more favorably to the current economic crisis. Our research is focused on rural areas in the Autonomous Region of Andalusia, which consists of 698 municipalities (LAU 2).⁴ In order to achieve this objective, we have used a methodology to identify STD and the factors that underlie such dynamics.

After this introductory section, the paper is organized as follows: Section 2 briefly outlines the conceptual framework; Section 3 outlines the methodology of the research; Section 4 presents the main results, whilst Section 5 draws discussion and conclusions and provides recommendations.

2. The conceptual framework

2.1. From space to territory

In the field of human geography, several authors have pointed out the neglect, the little attention or the poor definition associated to the concept of territory for a long time (Elden, 2005; Painter, 2010; Raffestin, 1980). The use of this concept, considered essential in studies of political geography and global politics (Elden, 2008; Häkli, 2001; Newman, 1999a, 1999b; Paasi, 1999, 2003), has widely spread in many research studies of the different disciplines of the social sciences in the last years. However, the use of the notion of territory is very often carried out without a precise, explicit and stable definition of the concept (Elden, 2010; Lussault, 2007).

Both, the complexity of this term and some of the “definitions” or usages found in previous studies of different areas were collected by Lévy (2003). Thus, the concept of territory, closely linked to that of spatiality, has been used as a synonym of space, place, and “geographical space”. These terms, however, are imprecise and denote a stationary character of territory. More specific and social definitions are those that consider territory as an “appropriated” space (ethological and biological connotations) and as a regulated space-bounded (the oldest and for a long time the commonest definition). According to Lévy, these two definitions are specific cases of a larger class of spaces comprising all objects defined by a continuous or topographical “metric”. Lévy distinguishes between the two large metrical “families”: the topographical, comprising spatially continuous objects, and the topological comprising networks and rhizomes. In this way, the author defines territory as “metrical topographical space”.

Like Lévy and Lussault (2007) locates the concept of territory in the topographical category but in his own definition eschews the term’s ethological connotations and focuses squarely on the political structuring of space. “Territory is a space structured by principles of contiguity and continuity which depend less on the material aspects of space than on the systems of ideas (*systèmes idéels*) that frame the space in question, as well as the related practices that take place there” (Lussault, 2007: 113). For Lussault, it is the political valorization of

⁴ To meet the need for statistics at local level, Eurostat has set up a system of Local Administrative Units (LAUs) compatible with NUTS. LAU level 1 corresponds to the former NUTS level 4, while LAU level 2 corresponds to the former NUTS level 5 and consists of municipalities or equivalent units in the 27 member countries. Although the LAU 1 level has not been defined for Spain, for purposes of our analysis we have adopted the nomenclature to refer to one of the two territorial levels analyzed, specifically counties as discussed below.

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