

POLICY BRIEF

SURDIM PROJECT

**INTERNATIONAL IMMIGRATION AND SUSTAINABLE RURAL DEVELOPMENT
IN THE PYRENEES. THE CASE OF GIRONA AND HUESCA PYRENEES
(SPAIN) AND THE EASTERN PYRENEES IN FRANCE**

INTRODUCTION

European rural localities may face depopulation and ageing which, in turn, might hamper local economies and make the territory more vulnerable to natural hazards and speculation. This results in a Catch-22 situation in which the older population may not be able to continue with their previous economic activities, while no new activities are created because of the emigration of young people. This pessimistic view is somehow counterbalanced by a perspective emphasizing visions of rural localities as offering a high quality of life for urban dwellers after pandemic times, even if this trend may be restricted to well-connected peri-urban areas. Both views point to the complexity in deciphering the role spatial mobilities play in the future of some rural places that are traditionally victims of outward migration and a lack of investment in economic and social infrastructure.

International migration towards rural areas is increasingly present in Europe. Indeed, international immigrants have prevented (or slowed down) depopulation in some rural areas, and they have played a critical role in agricultural restructuring and economic transformation in rural societies, at a time when farming has ceased to be the main source of employment in many European rural economies. In the move to address demographic challenges and shift from an exclusive reliance on agriculture, several economic activities have taken on a heightened importance by making substantial contributions to the survival of many rural areas. For instance, Photo 1 shows the variety of local businesses (rural tourism, tourist apartments, restaurants, shops, wine cellars, artists' ateliers) available in Rabós, a Girona village with fewer than 500 inhabitants.

MAIN STUDY AREAS

In this context, the EU-funded research project titled "SURDIM. Sustainable Rural Development and International Immigration in the Pyrenees" has focused specifically on international immigration in rural municipalities (fewer than 2000 inhabitants) of the Pyrenees. It has specifically studied immigrant pathways in both the French and Spanish Pyrenees to identify sustainable economic initiatives managed and/or supported by immigrants. Some of these

initiatives present successful experiences concerning rural development. From 2021 to 2023 the SURDIM project has aimed to contribute to improving territorial relations and integration in rural territories. The methodology of the project has consisted in multi-sited research that relies mainly on qualitative methods applied to carefully pre-selected case studies. The main fieldwork has been carried out from February to September 2022 in rural municipalities of Girona province (Alt Empordà, Ripollès and Cerdanya counties) and Huesca province (Ribagorza and Sobrarbe counties), in Spain, as well as the département of Eastern Pyrenees (Pyrénées Orientales) in France, focusing on the Prades and Céret arrondissements. A total of 45 in-depth interviews with foreign-born immigrants were undertaken in the three study areas (16 in Girona, 15 in Huesca and 14 in Pyrénées Orientales). Although the research did not attempt to achieve a representative sample, it is equally distributed between immigrant entrepreneurs, self-employed workers and employees. Immigrants are heterogeneous concerning their country of birth, being those coming from other European Union countries a majority. We also tried that informants were balanced by sex, even if women outnumbered men in the non-representative survey, and covered different ages, resulting in a broad spectrum of immigrants' labour incorporations. During fieldwork, 14 semi-structured interviews with a variety of other informants were also carried out in these regions, including mayors and municipal councilors.



Photo 1. Rabós (Alt Empordà), Girona. Economic diversification in a municipality with fewer than 500 inhabitants.

SUMMARY OF RESULTS

This policy briefing offers a summary of the main results from the SURDIM project, but a more detailed account of outcomes from this project will be available in academic articles and the project website (see below). Our results show that patterns of international migration into the Pyrenees are diverse. In this sense, the arrival into this mountain region might derive from a decision of immigrants already living in Spain/France and willing to move to a more 'salubrious' region, or they may immigrate straight from outside France/Spain, with the Pyrenees as their first destination in the country. In both cases, some new residents might have known the territory beforehand as tourists. Diversity is also appreciated in the variety of immigrants' incorporations into the labour markets, from the health sector to cultural-oriented services. This points to very dynamic rural labour markets in the Pyrenees region. Certainly, international immigrants in rural areas are highly divided into low-skilled workers in hospitality and farming, and those highly educated who have chosen these rural areas for lifestyle reasons. For all the interviewees, housing was a major problem, being accommodation a main reason for deterring new residents from moving into the region. In the case of the interviewed lifestyle residents, immigration into the Pyrenees is a household decision, generally motivated by the desire to escape the so-called fast pace of urban life, in a search for self-realization and a higher quality of life. In some cases, mobile housing or bungalows in campsites are a temporary solution for newcomers in some villages of the Pyrenees, including teleworkers or digital nomads (see Photo 2).



Photo 2. Irish mobile home (with stickers in English and French) that in 2022 was temporarily parked in Oms, a small village in the Eastern Pyrenees of France.

The SURDIM project finds also that the interviewed immigrant entrepreneurs – who are mainly highly skilled Northern, Western and Central European immigrants – usually fit themselves into the economic sectors dominant in the area (farming and tourist-oriented activities). Their success partially relies on the variety of capital they possess. This includes both human capital and their capacities for creating local, regional, and transnational social networks, even if their businesses are often small in both size and capital, without any employees in most cases. The interviews ultimately indicate that physically rooted social networks and relationships (and, more broadly, social incorporations) are not only key aspects for the development of businesses in the study areas but also provide a source of wellbeing.

International immigrants occasionally play a key role in the creation and introduction of innovative products in very specific market niches that had been little explored in mountainous rural areas. As examples, the research interviewed Márcia, a Brazilian national who works on cultural activities in a previously abandoned hamlet in Huesca; Michel, a retired French immigrant who has recovered the saffron production on a very scarcely inhabited locality also in Huesca Pyrenees (all names provided here are not real names for anonymity reasons). Even if the initiatives of the interviewed immigrant employers and self-employed workers might give way to successful businesses, the companies they create are generally family-run, and they usually produce a slight or low impact on local economic development and job creation in the Pyrenees. This is not though 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. 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 (Photo 3).



Photo 3. Village in Huesca Pyrenees. Immigrant business. Old school building restored as restaurant and travel agency managed by Dutch immigrants.

In other words, in some cases, small business run by international immigrants in small villages of the Pyrenees find that there is room for expanding and diversifying profitable activities along the years.

International migration can also bring about cultural exchange and social integration, enriching the fabric of local rural communities. Certainly, immigrants' perspectives, traditions, and knowledge systems might contribute to the social and cultural vitality of their host communities. Cultural diversity may indeed foster understanding, and social cohesion, ultimately strengthening the social fabric of rural societies. This is certainly the case of Misuki, a Japanese female who helped create an association of Japanese culture and language in the Eastern Pyrenees (Pyrénées Orientales), in France. Our study cases clearly indicate that immigrants show sensitivity when it comes to putting into value local, social, cultural and landscape or natural resources, which, in fact, are sometimes the reason why they decided to migrate to the "countryside". In this way, immigrants help to strengthen positive values on sustainability, community, and sense of place.

MAIN RECOMMENDATIONS

1) International immigrants in rural areas of the Pyrenees are highly divided between, on the one hand, low-skilled workers in hospitality and farming, and, on the other hand, highly educated entrepreneurs and retired people who may have chosen these rural areas for lifestyle motives. Regional, national, and European policy makers have to take this social divide more into account in order to accommodate newcomers in the rural Pyrenees as long-term inhabitants. Whatever the reason for moving into the rural area, housing is seen as the main problem for new incomers, hampering indeed potential development avenues in the Pyrenees. In this sense, a (new) housing policy in the Pyrenees can be recommended and will be appreciated by a wide variety of inhabitants and potential inhabitants of both mountains and valleys.

2) In the Pyrenees, immigrant entrepreneurs possess a variety of capitals, including both human capital and their capacities for creating local, regional, national, European, and transcontinental social networks. These capitals are key for business success. Local business associations in the Pyrenees are recommended to take more advantage of these (often unused) socio-economic potential and encourage immigrant participation in business organisations. Immigrants' views and perspectives may be of great help to develop sustainable local enterprises with wider international ambitions.

3) International immigration can also bring about cultural exchange and social integration, enriching the social fabric of rural communities. Sometimes rural immigrants also show special sensitivity towards local, social, cultural, landscape and natural resources (and certainly appreciate the current and potential amenities of rural areas) which, in fact, might be the reason why they decided to migrate to the "countryside". Some immigrants indeed might help to strengthen positive values on sustainability, community, and sense of place. Therefore, it is recommended that local governments and regional institutions in the Pyrenees make additional efforts for incorporating international immigrants into long-term cultural and social activities and projects.

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The SURDIM project was originally meant to be developed in two years, but it has finally lasted fifteen months (November 2021-October 2022 & June-August 2023).

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Website of the SURDIM project and the research program in Rural Immigration:

<https://atlantis.uab.cat/hamlets/en/index.html>

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