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Valero, Diana E; Escribano Pizarro, Jaime; Perez-Cosin, Jose Vicente

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Municipal perceptions and approaches to social exclusion in Spanish rural areas during the crisis

D. E. Valero, J. Escribano, J.V. Pérez⁴⁷

Abstract – This paper explores the perceptions and approaches that local authorities of rural areas have held regarding social exclusion and poverty processes during the 2008-2015 recession in Spain. Understanding how these processes have been perceived and approached by local authorities is important in order to identify how policies have been addressing poverty and social exclusion in rural areas. In line with this idea, we have focused our study on mayors' discourses about those processes, using evidence from two different qualitative research projects. The fieldwork was concurrently carried out during 2014 in two different regions: Castilla -La Mancha and Valencia. Results show significant common trends beyond territorial boundaries highlighting feedback relations between 'cojunctural' impacts of the crisis on (un)employment and the structural processes shaping social realities in rural Spain.

INTRODUCTION

The aim of this paper is to understand how poverty and social exclusion have been perceived and approached by local governments in Spanish rural areas.

Social exclusion and poverty in rural areas are characterized by two features that shape how these phenomena are perceived and addressed: i) the particular disadvantages that rural areas may present (Bertolini et al., 2009), and ii) an important lack of public awareness about them (Commins, 2004; Bertolini et al., 2009). However, the persistence of poverty in rural areas -particularly among rural women, children, and migrant minorities- is still one of the most important challenges faced by rural communities (Beaulieu, 2005).

The economic crisis of the last decade has had an undeniable impact on poverty and social exclusion rates in rural areas. While these processes have been general, there have been significant territorial differences within countries depending on the socio-economical features of each area. In Spain the percentage of the population at risk of poverty or social exclusion was consistently higher in rural areas than in cities, reaching in 2014 a rate of 43,8% while in urban areas it was 26,2% (Eurostat, 2017).

Policies coping with social exclusion are developed at all governmental levels, although the local scale has a remarkable position being the closest government to rural citizens. Public policy theory acknowledges the importance of cognitive capital -in combination with other types of resources- to set a

concrete public policy. So, studying the perceptions that local authorities may have to social exclusion seems fundamental to understand the policy choices that are made in rural areas.

METHODS AND ANALYSIS

This research is based on rural mayors' perceptions about social exclusion in their municipalities as an approach to understanding how actions against social exclusion are framed at the local level. Evidence has been pooled from two different qualitative research projects about social exclusion carried out during 2014 in rural areas of two different regions in Spain: Castilla-La Mancha (Sierra de Alcaraz and Campo de Montiel in Albacete) and Valencia (inland areas of Castellón and Valencia provinces and mountain areas in Alicante). The diversity of situations regarding geography (remoteness and accessibility), socio-demographic trends (population level), policy features (classification in rural development programmes) and political orientation (political party of the mayor) were taken into account when selecting the case studies. A total of 35 mayors of rural municipalities were interviewed on the topic. We analysed the mayors' narratives following the three classical axes of inequality -gender, age, and origin- in order to i) identify their perceptions of social exclusion and how it affects different groups of people, and ii) how those perceptions are linked to the approaches taken to address poverty and social exclusion.

⁴⁷ D. E. Valero is from University of Highlands and Islands, Perth College, Centre for Mountain Studies, Scotland, UK (diana.valero.perth@uhi.ac.uk). J. Escribano is from the Rural Development Research Group (UDERVAL), University of Valencia, Spain (Jaime.Escribano@uv.es). J.V. Pérez is from the Community Social Services Research Group (SESOCO), University of Valencia, Spain (Jose.V.Perez@uv.es).



RESEARCH RESULTS

Social exclusion perceptions

First, there is not one common view on social exclusion among rural mayors, but they usually tend to perceive a low incidence of social exclusion in their municipalities.

On the contrary to what reports and literature indicate about gender differences (Bertolini et al., 2009; Beaulieu, 2005), rural mayors tend to show bigger concerns about men than women. Unemployment -and in particular the loss of jobs because of the crisis- seems to be the crucial factor in social exclusion processes as perceived by rural mayors. When there is an acknowledgment of the particular risks of social exclusion faced by rural women, it is linked to the combination of the local labour market constraints with personal factors (e.g. lack of mobility, qualifications) while social control and gender inequalities as exclusion factors are only occasionally mentioned.

The axis of origin does not appear in the mayors' discourses. While immigrants would be included in reports as one of the groups most at risk of social exclusion, they are rarely even recognised by the interviewees. However, mayors highlight the risks of another profile which does not appear in the reports: ex-urban dwellers who have moved to the rural area looking for a more affordable lifestyle after the first impacts of the crisis. Unemployment and problematic backgrounds are seen as the factors shaping the exclusion risks of this group.

Concerning age, children are rarely mentioned. The group whose vulnerability is highlighted in both regions is the elderly population, linking it to low incomes and the combination of high needs of health care with a limited local offer of health services. Valencian mayors also showed concern for young people, focusing particularly on their high unemployment rates.

Approaches to face social exclusion

We have found two main types of municipal approaches to face the social exclusion processes described in the mayors' discourses. On the one hand, there are measures focused on attending the unemployment crisis: employment programs, advice and assistance for employment search, and even giving priority to unemployed people for accessing other social benefits and programmes. On the other hand, mayors describe other types of programmes with an approach based on aid: monetary benefits and specific programmes to attend particular profiles

as women, immigrants, dependents, and disabled people. Here the discourse is framed by a narrative focused on blaming austerity policy decisions made by other government levels regarding the distribution of resources, closure of services, or cutbacks.

FINAL REMARKS

These common trends align well with the notion of invisibility of social exclusion in rural areas and show a distorted perception of the phenomenon. Mayors tend to overlook those vulnerable profiles that are usually highlighted by reports, what indicates: i) a tendency to invisibilize groups like women, immigrants and children; and ii) a tendency to make equivalent social exclusion with unemployment. These perceptions are reflected in municipal actions, which are focused on fighting or alleviating (the most visible) unemployment, particularly regarding the traditional heads of the family. Attention to other factors shaping social exclusion is left in the hands of services and programmes which have been affected by cutbacks and other provision constraints. So, we would like to resume that the employment crisis has reinforced a peculiar self-perception of the rural community and the social process affecting it, by placing the focus on local-male-centred dynamics while ignoring the complexity of factors underpinning the vulnerability of other social groups.

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