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Final event of the project *Strategic Governance Plan for Rural Depopulation in Asturias, Cantabria, Castilla y León and Galicia (RESOE)*

Summary record

3 December 2021

Setting the context

In the framework of the OECD work stream *Preparing Regions for Demographic Change*, the project *Strategic Governance Plan for Rural Depopulation in RESOE* aims to help policy makers manage the challenge of demographic change. The RESOE macro-region (regions of Asturias, Cantabria, Castilla y León and Galicia in Spain) has a high degree of rurality, and is facing challenges associated with population decline and ageing. The project provided national, regional and local stakeholders with an action plan for each region and a common strategy for the four regions on relevant topics to OECD rural regions facing depopulation: quality service provision, entrepreneurship, innovation, digitalisation, and multi-level governance.

Final event's summary record

1. The final event was hybrid and took place on 3 December 2021 in the Fundación Comillas (Comillas, Cantabria). It brought to an end the OECD project *Strategic Governance Plan for Rural Depopulation in RESOE*, supported by DG Reform (European Commission), and launched a common strategy for the RESOE macro-region in Spain and four regional action plans for Asturias, Cantabria, Castilla y León and Galicia. Moderated by Jose Enrique Garcilazo (Deputy Head of the Regional Development and Multi-level Governance Division at the OECD Centre for Entrepreneurship, SMEs, Regions and Cities), the event discussed rural depopulation challenges and brought together policy makers from Spain, the RESOE macro-region and other OECD regions, as well as international experts, to share experiences of best practices in managing demographic change in rural areas. Agenda is available [here](#).
2. The event started with virtual welcome high-level remarks by Nadim Ahmad (Deputy Director of the OECD Centre for Entrepreneurship, SMEs, Regions and Cities) and Mario Nava (Director-General of the Directorate-General Structural Reform Support at the European Commission), who welcomed the positive results of this project, the cooperation between the OECD and DG Reform, and the importance of addressing the challenge of rural depopulation in both organisations.
3. The event was also attended by four high-level representatives from the four project regions: Jaime Izquierdo (Commissioner for Demographic Challenge of the Government of Asturias), María Sánchez (Councillor for Economy and Finance of the Government of Cantabria), Francisco Igea (Vice-President and Councillor for Transparency, Territorial Planning and External Action of the Government of Castilla y León), and Fabiola

García Martínez (Councillor for Social Policy of the Government of Galicia, via a video intervention). All noted that the demographic challenge in rural areas is a priority for their respective governments and that these projects are key to identifying potential solutions and fostering cooperation between different administrations.

4. The OECD Centre for Entrepreneurship, SMEs, Regions and Cities presented the project's action plans starting by reminding the project's timeline and by presenting RESOE regions' main demographic trends. On entrepreneurship, innovation and digitalisation, Marc Bournisien de Valmont (Policy Analyst in the OECD Regional and Rural Policy Unit) discussed on the importance of increasing rural enterprises opportunities and improving their access to information and financial resources, of boosting regional innovation and aligning sectoral specialisation with natural and demographic assets, and of unblocking barriers to increase connectivity and digital service provision. He then indicated that RESOE regions and in particular rural areas experience greater difficulties in terms of costs and access to education. On this issue, he pointed out that the action plans suggest to adopt more flexible strategies that can adjust to the ebb and flow of demand on the school network, to ensure the most efficient use of school resources in rural areas, and to leverage digital solutions to improve school transport and close digital skills gaps. On the governance issue, Manuel Barros (Policy Analyst in the OECD Decentralisation, Public Investment and Subnational Finance Unit) then stated that municipal fragmentation, coordination issues and financial insufficiency hinder the provision of services. To meet these challenges, he stressed that it is necessary to strengthen service provision by promoting collaboration mechanisms within regions, to clarify competences and distribution of responsibilities, strengthen coordination between regional ministries, deepen macro-regional and cross-border horizontal collaboration, and strengthen the national level's coordinating mechanisms of vertical collaboration.

5. The event also counted with onsite participation from regional policy makers of the four regions and national officials: Jorge Luis Vega (Deputy Director General for Analysis, Planning and Coordination of the General Direction of Policies Against Depopulation in the Spanish Ministry for the Ecological Transition and the Demographic Challenge), Ramiro Lomba (from the Asturias Society for Economic and Industrial Studies - SADEI), Paz Díaz Nieto (Director General for European Funds of the Cantabrian Regional Ministry of Economy and Finance), Antonio Calonge Velázquez (Director General for Territorial Planning of Castilla y León's Regional Ministry for Transparency, Territorial Planning and External Action) and Xosé Lago García (Deputy Director General for External Action and Cross-border Cooperation of Galicia's Regional Ministry of the Presidency, Public Administration and Justice). All of them underlined the relevance of these action plans to jointly address the outlined challenges and to join forces in the proposed macro-regional strategy.

6. Policy experts from the University of Birmingham, DG REGIO and the Portuguese Agency for Development and Cohesion participated in a policy exchange's panel to bring international perspectives and experiences to the discussion. Professor Raquel Ortega-Argilés (Chair in Regional Economic Development of the Department of Strategy and International Business of the Birmingham Business School) pointed out that the digital agenda will bring opportunities to rural areas and that these areas have potential benefits to promote innovation and entrepreneurship. Francesca Michielin (Programme Assistant for Portugal and Spain in DG REGIO) highlighted the key role of EU mechanisms in addressing the challenges mentioned in the discussions and, in particular, of smart specialisation strategies. Nuno Oliveira Romão (Coordinator in the Portuguese Agency for Development and Cohesion) underlined that Portugal and Spain face the same challenges and that strong multi-level cooperation is essential to build an effective response to these challenges.

7. Finally, Maria Varinia Michalun (Senior Project Manager in the OECD Decentralisation, Public Investment and Subnational Finance Unit) summarised the main points raised at the event and thanked – on behalf of the OECD – DG Reform for its successful collaboration as well as all regional, national and international actors involved in the project for their active participation.

8. The event was attended by over 100 people (44 onsite and 60 via Zoom) and was covered in press notes from the governments of [Cantabria](#) and [Castilla y León](#) as well as in regional newspapers of:

- Cantabria:
 - [La OCDE y Cantabria seguirán colaborando frente al reto del despoblamiento rural](#)
 - [Cantabria pide "frente común" con CyL, Galicia y Asturias para financiación](#)
 - [La consejera de Economía de Cantabria, María Sánchez, pide una reforma del sistema de financiación autonómica, la variable en los costes fijos y pondere la dispersión poblacional](#)
 - [Economía defiende un sistema de financiación autonómica que pondere "adecuadamente" la dispersión de la población](#)
- Castilla y León:
 - [La OCDE ultima una estrategia frente a la despoblación para Castilla y León, Cantabria, Asturias, Galicia y Portugal](#)
 - [La OCDE ultima su propuesta de plan estratégico de gobernanza para la despoblación rural](#)
 - [La OCDE ultima el plan estratégico para la despoblación rural en el suroeste de Europa](#)
- Galicia
 - [La Xunta insta a "implicarse activamente" para superar el reto demográfico al que se enfrenta "gran parte de Europa"](#)