

# **GOOD PRACTICES IN SOCIAL WELFARE IN RURAL AREAS**



GOBIERNO  
DE ESPAÑA

MINISTERIO  
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POR SOLIDARIDAD  
OTROS FINES DE INTERÉS SOCIAL



**RedR**

Red Española de Desarrollo Rural



# SOCIAL WELFARE

**S**ocial welfare is a concept related to the satisfaction of the population with regard to their living conditions. It is **related** to all aspects of a person's life and covers **multiple aspects**, from access to health, education, housing, employment and connectivity.

Social welfare is therefore a **key feature of rural development and territorial cohesion**. However, the components of welfare do not have the same weight in urban and rural areas, since there are generally dissimilarities in terms of access to services and infrastructure. It is therefore important that social welfare policies are linked to rural development and **take into account the territorial disparities present in rural areas**. This would therefore ensure access for all citizens to social resources on equal terms, and a decent quality of life (Ares, Auer, y Mikkelsen 2022; Sampedro Gallego 1995).

In this context, the Spanish Rural Development Network (REDR) has carried out an **exhaustive analysis of good practices** for promoting social well-being focused on rural areas, both at a national and European level. By publicising this set of initiatives, strategies and projects, we want to help promote their **implementation and replication** in different spheres and organisations. In order to facilitate the visibility of good practices for well-being, the compilation has focused on the following themes: housing, transport, entrepreneurship, demography and mediation, local services, itinerant services for the population, voluntary work and unwanted loneliness.







## Did you know?

**R**EDR comprises 13 territorial networks and over 180 **Local Action Groups (LAG)**. The work of this network of 1,500 technical personnel extends to over 7,000 municipalities, which impacts the lives of nine million people in rural areas.

In rural areas, the LAG are the main **territorial drivers**. Their involvement in the implementation of initiatives and policies related to social welfare is key to achieving solutions adapted to the territory and the demands of the population.

For over 30 years, LEADER has been the main tool for financing projects for rural development in the European Union with EAFRD funds. It uses a **bottom-up approach**, where the community itself and local actors, through LAG, foster the development of their territory through **active participation**.



# HOUSING

According to the latest data from Eurostat (2022), **Spain is one of the EU countries where emancipation takes place the latest**. Ranked fourth, only behind Croatia, Slovakia and Greece, young Spanish people become emancipated almost 4 years later than the European average **(at 30 years old compared to 26)**. This figure contrasts with that of countries such as Finland, Sweden or Denmark, where young people leave the parental home almost a decade earlier (Eurostat 2022a).

The late emancipation of young people in Spain is attributed to the relationship between their **income level** and the purchase prices of housing, as well as the level of **excessive effort** required to pay the rent for a home. In 2022, **39.4% of people renting a home** at market prices in Spain spent over **40% of their income on rent**, compared to the EU average of 20.8% (Eurostat 2022b).

This reality is even more difficult in rural environments where housing availability is scarce, contributing to the exodus of young people and the depopulation of rural areas (BOE 2022).

Given the alarming housing situation faced by young Spaniards, especially in areas at risk of depopulation, measures to support house-purchase and rent are imperative.







# 1. State Plan for Access to Housing 2022-2025 and Youth Rental Bonus

## Spain

The **State Plan for Access to Housing 2022-2025** establishes a series of short-term objectives focused on developing and strengthening direct aid to tenants, as well as a set of medium-term objectives to increase the supply of rental housing in both urban and rural environments.

In order to achieve these objectives, the Plan is structured into 13 aid programmes, where **Programme 5** stands out. **It is a programme to help young people and contribute to the demographic challenge.** This programme provides rental support (up to €600/month, or €300 if it is a room) for young people under 35 with incomes under 3 times the IPREM [Public Indicator of Multiple Effects Income], as well as **support for the purchase of homes** in municipalities with a population equal to or under **10,000 inhabitants** (up to €10,800 for homes under €120,000).

The **Youth Rental Bonus**, an additional support of €250/month for two years to promote access to housing and emancipation for young people up to 35, is compatible with the State Plan for Access to Housing. Both programmes are channelled through the Autonomous Communities. Find out more [here](#) (State Plan) and [here](#) (Youth Rental Bonus) about the requirements and how to access support in your Community (MIVAU, s. f.; BOE 2022).





## 2. Zero Tax Programme in rural Galicia

### Galicia

In 2016, the Xunta de Galicia [Regional Government of Galicia] launched the **Zero Taxes in Rural Areas Programme, eliminating taxes on the transfer of rural land**, the total or partial transfer of agricultural holdings and the grouping together of rural properties.

A year later, the programme was expanded, so that **young people, large families and people with disabilities can benefit from paying zero taxes** on the purchase, restoration or transfer of property in Galicia's Sparsely Populated Areas (ZPP), which cover **94% of the territory**, or around 3,460 municipalities (Xunta de Galicia, s. f.-b).

In addition, in order to support the purchase of a primary residence, the Xunta de Galicia has been reducing the Property Transfer Tax (ITP) in recent years. This has especially benefited large families, people with disabilities, **young people under 36** and victims of gender violence, groups for which the ITP is **reduced to 3%** when purchasing a primary residence.

Furthermore, this reduction has also been particularly notable in rural areas at risk of depopulation, reaching 6% for purchasing a property in a ZPP and 5% for a main residence in a ZPP. Consequently, **rural Galicia has the lowest tax rate for the purchase of a home throughout Spain** (Xunta de Galicia 2023).



# 3. Depopulation and Development of the Rural Areas Law

## Castile-La Mancha

**T**he Law 2/2021 on Economic, Social and Tax Measures to combat Depopulation and for the Development of the Rural Areas in Castilla-La Mancha establishes **tax incentives for members of the population to settle in depopulated areas and small municipalities.**

In compliance with this Act, the regional government has undertaken a **zoning of the rural areas** of the Autonomous Community. In the region, 52 areas have been classified as extremely depopulated, intensely depopulated, at risk of depopulation and intermediate areas with under 2,000 inhabitants.

Depending on the area to which they belong, rural municipalities can benefit from different **tax deductions**, which include reductions in the ITP or IRPF (Spanish Income Tax) for the acquisition and restoration of habitual housing or for residence in these sparsely populated areas (Gobierno de Castilla-La Mancha, s. f.-a).



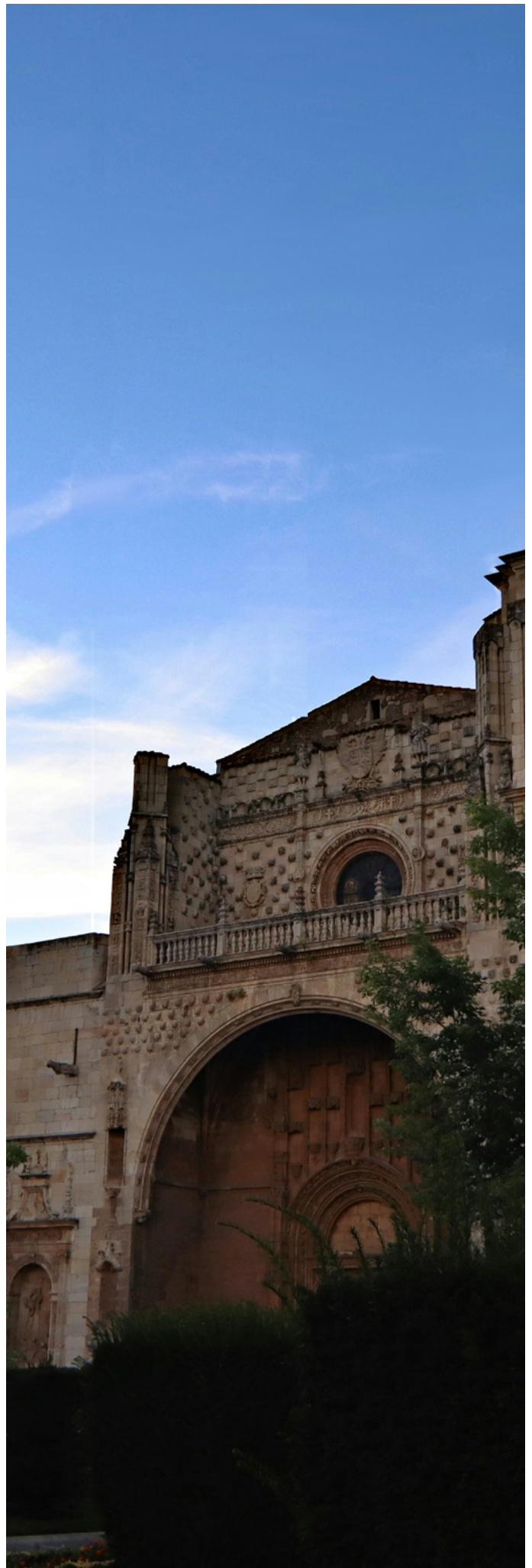


## 4. Ruralar: rural youth housing programme

León. Castile and León

**R**uralar is an initiative of the León Provincial Council aimed at **promoting access to housing in rural areas for young people** aged 18 to 36 registered in the province of León to foster emancipation and the contributes to reducing depopulation in rural areas.

The available subsidies include financial support for the acquisition, construction (up to €2,900), **renovation and alterations** (up to €2,900) of homes in towns with a population of under 20,000 inhabitants, as well as **rental support** (up to €2,000) in municipalities with under 12,000 inhabitants (Diputación de León 2023).





# 5. Financial incentives to move to a small Alpine village

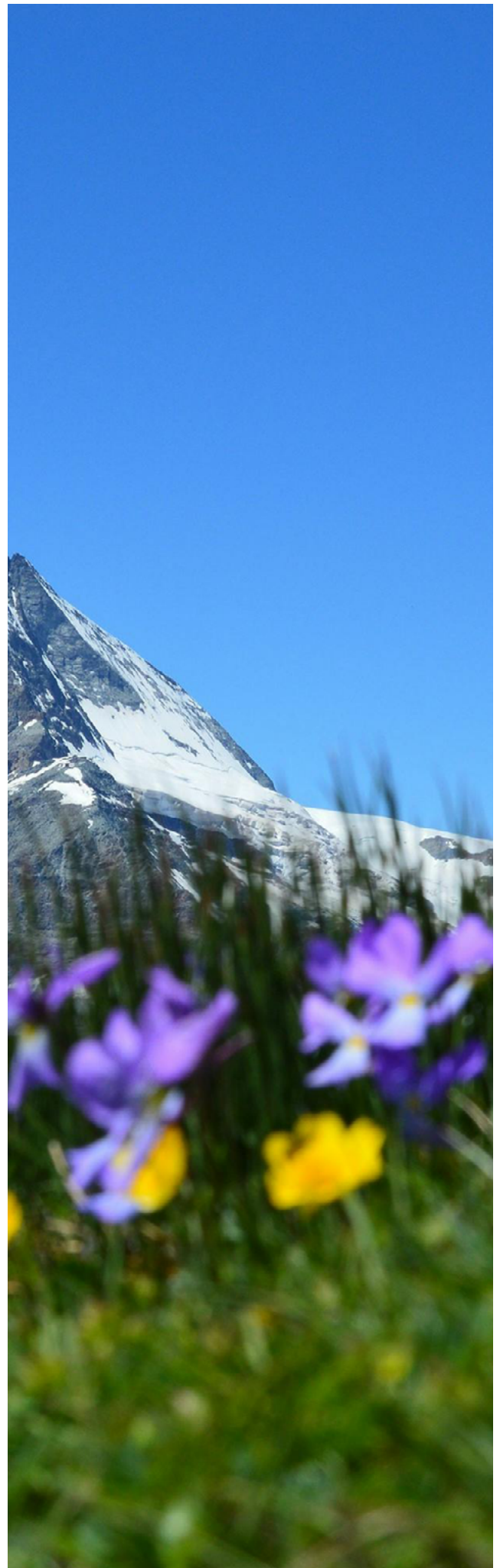
Albinen. Canton of Valais, Switzerland

**A**lbinen is a small village in the Swiss Alps that has been experiencing an **alarming process of rural depopulation** for years due to the exodus to larger towns. The town of 240 inhabitants was even forced to **close its school** due to the lack of students. In order to resolve this situation, the residents of Albinen voted in favour of an **initiative to attract new residents**.

Therefore, since 2018, the town has been offering 25,000 francs for each adult who moves and 10,000 for each child. To be eligible for these benefits, applicants must be under 45 and have a residence permit. In addition, they must commit to living in Albinen for at least 10 years and invest 200,000 francs in the new property.

At the start of the project, local authorities announced that they hoped to attract between five and 10 families in the coming years.

Five years later, Albinen's strategy seems to have paid off. The village **has approved 17 applications, attracting almost 50 new residents**, for whom it has paid a total of 710,000 francs. (SWI swissinfo.ch 2017; Albinen 2017; SWI swissinfo.ch 2023).





# TRANSPORT

There is typically a **lack of mobility and public transport connections** in small towns and villages in rural areas, especially those where depopulation is more intense. In this context, the existence of a regular bus line is not an economically viable option given the shortage of passengers.

Therefore, in these cases, **on-demand transportation** can be a better alternative.

On-demand public transport is a system where the **service is planned by focusing on the needs of the interested parties**.

Through telephone or telematic methods, the user can previously express their interest in making a trip on the established route, so that the transport service is scheduled according to the demand of the residents of these small population centres.

This system therefore provides **flexibility** to the population in terms of time and place of pick-up and arrival, while **guaranteeing the reliability of the service and optimising existing resources** (Pueblos Vivos 2020).





# 1. On-Demand Public Transport Service

## Spain

**O**n-demand transport is a modality designed to provide transport coverage to the most depopulated rural areas, where the maintenance of a regular network would not be economically profitable due to the low density population.

On-demand transport makes it possible to meet the needs of users, who can reserve the route, timetable and number of seats required by telephone or via the Internet.

In Spain, one of the Autonomous Communities that pioneered this type of transport is **Castile and León**. The on-demand public transport service provided by the regional government has been in operation **since 2004** and currently serves over **5,000 rural villages**, connecting 1.3 million inhabitants. With nearly **5 million users registered since its implementation**, those interested can access this service through the **Rural Card**, which costs €5 initially and provides free travel on on-demand public transport. Journeys need to be reserved in advance by phone or through an application (Junta de Castilla y León, s. f.).

Since then, many regions have been implementing this transport system to provide coverage to their rural communities.

Since 2017, the **Galician** public transport system includes on-demand lines, and in Pontevedra the **“Coche a Punto”**, or “Country Taxi” initiative is being

prepared to provide coverage for municipalities in rural areas (Transporte Público de Galicia, s. f.).

**La Rioja** has had **rural lines** since 2018 to facilitate communication for nearly 6,000 inhabitants in over sixty towns and villages. These lines have on-demand service in the areas of Nájera, Cameros, Arnedo and Lugar del Río (larioja.org, s. f.).

In **Catalonia**, Barcelona has had the **“meu Bus”** or “My Bus” scheme since 2019 to facilitate travel in peripheral neighbourhoods of the city not covered by regular bus lines. Meanwhile, in rural areas such as Les Garrigues, in Lleida, or Terra Alta, in Tarragona, they have suggested boosting the attraction and territorial equity of rural areas through on-demand bus lines (TMB, s. f.).

Since 2020, the **northern mountains of Madrid** area has had **“Sierra Car”** or “Mountain Car”, an initiative of the Lozoya North Valley community which provides coverage for 52 municipalities in the area (Comunidad de Madrid, s. f.).

**Connected Rural Andalusia** is a network of 83 bus routes established in 2021 that connects municipalities which mostly have under 5,000 inhabitants and are not covered by regular bus lines (Junta de Andalucía, s. f.).

Article 46 of the Law 2/2021 on Economic, Social and Tax Measures to combat Depopulation and for the Development of the Rural Areas in Castilla-La Mancha 2/2021, 7 May 2021, stipulates that public transport in rural areas will be provided mainly through **demand-sensitive transport**, providing maximum coverage and facilitating travel for its residents. It began to be implemented in 2021 in the Cuenca Mountain Range and, given its success, has been extended to other rural regions and municipalities at risk of depopulation. In 2023, 46,765 people across 167 municipalities in the provinces of Cuenca, Ciudad Real and Guadalajara benefited from the scheme (BOE 2021; Gobierno de Castilla-La Mancha 2024).

In 2023, the **Murcia Region** launched the **Ruralbus** service in 3 of its municipalities, providing coverage to 26 rural settlements in order to link them to the urban centre of the municipality (Murcia.com 2024).

Other communities such as **Navarra** and **Aragón** also have on-demand transport in some of their rural regions, and others such as the Valencian Community, Asturias, Extremadura, Cantabria and the Canary Islands are studying its implementation.







# ENTREPRENEURSHIP

Cities and large towns have traditionally been the protagonists of entrepreneurial and original ventures. However, rural areas often offer the ideal context in which to turn new ideas into successful businesses and innovations. More and more people are deciding to invest in **rural entrepreneurship**.

Rural entrepreneurship can be a very attractive option from an economic point of view, as it has lower operating costs and a less exploited market niche. The fact of being able to work directly with local suppliers also encourages collaboration and the formation of community networks, therefore fostering **social cohesion**.


Thus, entrepreneurship in rural areas not only benefits the individual, but the community in general. It boosts the

**local economy** by generating employment, attracting new inhabitants and contributing to the **settlement of population**. It therefore has the capacity to **revitalise and energise rural areas**.

Attracting talent and developing entrepreneurial projects can also help preserve the **cultural and natural heritage** of the territory, through tourism, for example.

Ultimately, encouraging rural entrepreneurship is synonymous with boosting the local economy, the feeling of identity and belonging, local culture and the **well-being and quality of life** of residents (RRN 2021; REDR 2022).





# 1. Rural Ticket and other assistance from Local Action Groups

## Asturias

**R**ural Ticket is an initiative that has been implemented by the [Asturian Rural Development Network \(READER\)](#) with **EAFRD funds** since 2016. It consists of providing aid to unemployed people who **wish to undertake non-agricultural economic activities in rural Asturias** (setting up companies, businesses or other economic activities).

During the 2016-2022 period, 108 people benefited from the Rural Ticket, with assistance up to €35,000. During the 2023-2027 new period, this assistance can reach up to €50,000.

If you want to find out more, take a look at the REDR webinar “Sharing LEADER experiences: Rural Ticket and multidisciplinary management”, available [here](#).

**Did you know?** More Autonomous Communities have now signed up to this initiative. During the 2023-2027 period, Aragón, Cantabria, Castile-La Mancha, Catalonia, Navarra, Extremadura, Galicia, Madrid and the Basque Country have joined.

Find out more through your **Local Action Group!**



Another initiative similar to the Rural Ticket in Asturias are **LEADER Funds for business development in the Madrid Western Mountains District**. The grants, awarded by the [Association for the Integral Development of the Madrid Western Mountains District](#), are intended to promote the increase of local employment, the improvement of the quality of the agro-food industry, and the expansion of services for the community, among other aspects. They are aimed primarily at small businesses, self-employed workers, and unemployed people, who may be eligible for up to a **€15,000 lump sum**, in order to develop a new business in premises open to the public.



**The assistance intended for the creation of companies engaged in non-agricultural activities in rural areas of Cantabria** are also a source of financial support for entrepreneurship. This is a grant of **€12,000** linked to a non-agricultural business plan that advances 80% of the amount upon signing the contract; this greatly facilitates the start-up of the business. This rural bonus is offered by the [five Cantabria LAGs](#).





## 2. Back to the village [Volver al pueblo]

### Spain

In rural areas, there are currently several platforms focused on facilitating **the search for employment and retaining people** in certain territories. Back to the village is an example of this. It is a tool to promote the **settlement and occupation of the population in rural environments** through available housing, land, job offers and businesses bank.

This platform not only lists resources available in rural Spain. Since its launch in 2018 by **COCEDER**, the Confederation of Rural Development Centres also provide comprehensive support and guidance for the entire family in the search for housing, entrepreneurship, and assistance with seeking employment in the area, etc. (Pueblos Vivos 2020).

Access the Back to the village platform [here](#).





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# BIRTH RATES AND WORK-LIFE BALANCE

**A**cross the world, there is a **general decline in birth rates**. This trend is observed above all in high-income countries, and is especially evident in the European Union. Various studies attribute this declining birth rate to the fact that people are reaching the desired income level to become parents at an increasingly later age, mainly due to the high costs of having children and the importance given to work-life balance.

Only through a society and policies that support and empower young adults to achieve their goals of motherhood and fatherhood can a resilient birth rate be achieved (FutuRes, s. f.; van Wijk y Billari 2024).

These facts show the **need for a paradigm shift**, since the birth rate policies implemented in the 20th century are not effective in today's society. The answer to the demographic challenge, according to professional researchers, lies in **investing in the well-being of the individual, sexual and reproductive rights and work-life balance**.





# 1. The Scandinavian model

Europe: Sweden, Denmark, Norway, Finland

**T**he recent **EU legislation on work-life balance** (Directive (EU) 2019/1158 on work-life balance for parents and carers), which is mandatory in EU Member States, standardises certain aspects of work-life balance throughout the European Union. In this way, both parents are entitled to 2 months of paid sick leave, in addition to another 2 months of unpaid leave. It also includes a 5-day-per-year leave for carers and a parental leave for birth of 10 days paid per parent (DOUE 2019).



**In Spain, maternity and paternity leave is currently 16 weeks (4 months).**

However, other countries such as Norway, Sweden, Finland and Denmark have decided to go further by incorporating improvements in the flexibility of the working day (hours and place), as well as in holiday and maternity and paternity leave. These countries **have thus decided to focus on the balance between personal and work life in order to achieve a balance between family and work.**

In Sweden, maternity/paternity leave is up to 480 days (16 months) at 80% of salary, and in Norway it is almost a year. In Denmark, the State finances up to 70% of child care (daycare), and in Finland it is also subsidized.

All these countries also have by law a minimum of 25 days of vacation/5 weeks per year (Rigby 2020).

The birth rate in Scandinavian countries is quite different from that in Spain. In Denmark and Sweden, for example, this figure is 1.55 and 1.53 respectively, while in Spain it is 1.16 (data from 2022). Spain is the European country with the lowest birth rate after Malta (Eurostat 2024).



## 2. FutuRes

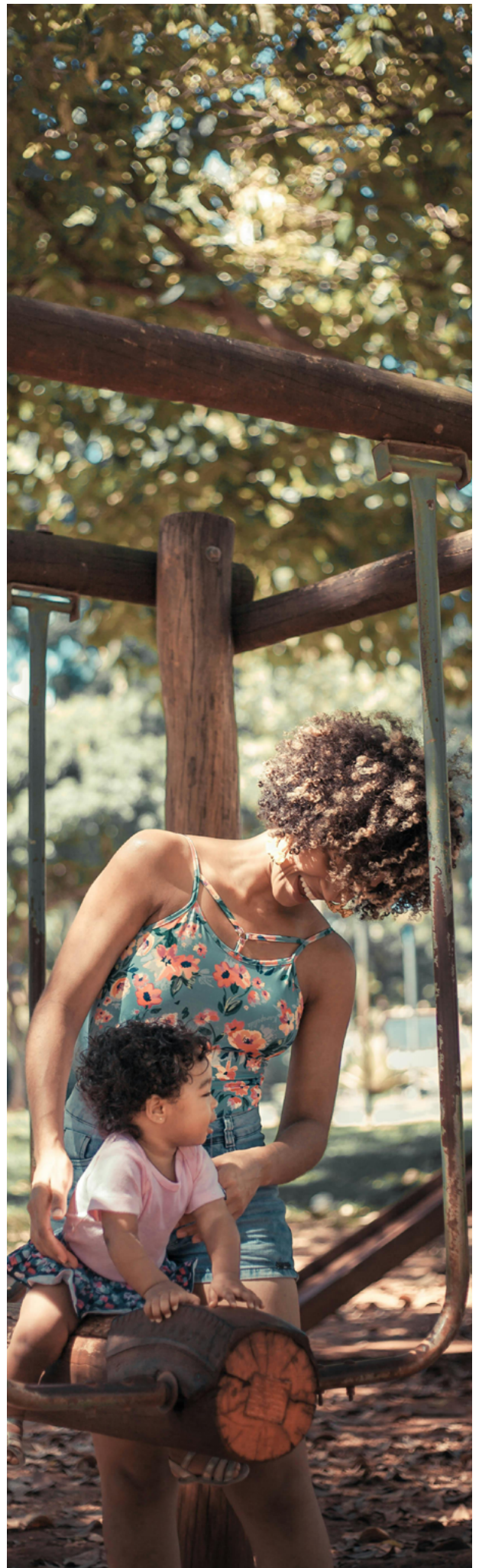
### Europe

**F**utuRes is a project led by the Department of Social and Political Sciences at Bocconi University (Milan, Italy), funded by the Horizon Europe programme, which is scheduled to end in 2025.

It is a research project in which experts in demography, economics and politics are preparing an exhaustive analysis of the **causes, solutions and future scenarios of the demographic challenge facing Europe.**

Research groups from universities in different countries, as well as organisations and companies, are participating in it. In addition, several European networks are involved, such as Population Europe, a collaborative network of researchers and centres specialising in demographic studies.

FutuRes aims to serve as a tool for European policy to approach the decline in birth rates in a different way by creating a **resilient and sustainable system over time, based on social equality, the inclusion of migrants and reproductive rights** (FutuRes, s. f.).



## 3. Nest houses

### Galicia

Since 2015, the Xunta de Galicia has provided assistance for the creation of nest houses in municipalities with **fewer than 5,000 inhabitants**. This is a **model of child care** for boys and girls up to 3 years of age that is implemented in rural localities where there are no nurseries.

This model, adapted to the characteristics of **rural councils**, is provided by professionals who manage caring for groups of up to 5 children either in their own home or in premises that are rented or provided and which must always meet certain requirements. It consists of a **flexible service** where the **comprehensive development** of minors is promoted through care and learning. The service is offered **free of charge** from Monday to Friday (except holidays) for up to 8 hours a day.

In 2024, the total number of nest houses in Galicia has been 103, half of them in Ourense (51), 27 in Lugo, 19 in A Coruña and 6 in Pontevedra (Pueblos Vivos 2020; Xunta de Galicia, s. f.-a).





## 4. Rural nurseries

### Catalonia

In 2022, the Generalitat de Catalunya [Government of Catalonia] launched the **Rural Revitalisation Plan** in an effort to reverse the depopulation of the rural municipalities of the Autonomous Community. One of the measures of the Plan is the creation of **rural nurseries** to facilitate equal educational opportunities in rural areas. These nurseries would be integrated into existing rural schools.

For this purpose, the Generalitat has signed an agreement with the town councils of municipalities with under 2,500 inhabitants, where of the €30,000 per year maximum that it costs to maintain these state schools, they only have to contribute €5,000.

These **small, state-run rural schools** in Catalonia do not have different groups by educational level due to their low number of students. Currently there are **363 rural schools** in the Community, which are a crucial part of life in the region's small municipalities.

Of the **101 rural nurseries planned**, 78 have been opened since 2022, and the remaining ones will open throughout 2024 (Diari Ara 2024).





# COMMUNITY SERVICES

The community aspect is always an ideal feature of care services, where such services can be carried out in a decentralised manner in order to facilitate the **autonomy and independence of people** going about their daily activities and their **social integration**.

Community services are especially important in rural contexts, which are usually related to ageing, since they ensure that people **can remain in their homes and live with dignity** as they grow older. At the same time, making these types of services available to the rural population, and not just for people who live in large cities, contributes to **improving the quality of life and strengthening the economy**, which in turn helps to retain the population.

In short, proximity services play a key role in maintaining a **lively and active rural world**. (Martínez Rodríguez y Díaz Pérez).





# 1. Highlands and Islands

## Scotland

The Highlands and Islands of Scotland, located in the northwest of the country, have been suffering from depopulation for decades. One of the measures to meet this demographic challenge was the creation in 1965 of a public agency called **HIE (Highlands and Islands Enterprise)**. This organisation is independent of the government and has the authority to carry out short-, medium- and long-term plans, whose aim is to build a **prosperous, sustainable and inclusive economy** throughout the Highlands and Islands that contributes to **more people living, working, studying, visiting and investing in rural areas**.

Since its inception, the HIE has therefore been committed to the economic development of rural areas, focusing on the fishing sector and tourism and attracting visitors and new settlers. One of the main projects was the **creation of a university** (University of the Highlands and Islands) as a

means for retaining and attracting talented young people. However, the measures implemented managed to reverse the inverse growth of the Scottish rural population, which **increased by 22%** since the creation of the HIE until 2011. Currently, the HIE's activity framework is based on its **'2023-28 Strategy'**, which highlights the access of the rural population to **community services** as a cross-cutting issue in its actions (HIE 2023).

On the other hand, the Scottish government announced its **second Action Plan to address Depopulation** in 2024. This is a national response, carried out at a local level, in close collaboration with administrations, agencies and Local Action Groups, as well as with the HIE. The plan addresses issues such as **housing, transport, digitalisation, health, childcare, attracting talent, the economy of communities, just transition and the promotion of Gaelic** (The Scottish Government 2024).

## 2. Plan for filling difficult-to-fill positions

### Catalonia

In Catalonia, **one in five** Primary Care Teams (PCT) is considered difficult to cover and is located in rural areas. There are a total of **73 primary care centres with difficult coverage**.

The Plan offers **financial incentives** to health professionals who want to work or work in centres with difficult coverage in rural areas: family and community medicine doctors, as well as paediatricians, will receive an increase in their annual salary of €3,500, and in the case of nurses, midwives and social workers, it will be €2,000.

In addition, these health professionals will also receive **professional incentives**, as facilitating research and teaching, continuing education, connection with other professionals, cross-consultations and flexible working hours are provided.

Regarding the **personal sphere**, the Plan also includes a series of measures, ranging from prioritising housing and mobility, to providing training subsidies and employment for the family unit through agreements with municipal entities (Generalitat de Catalunya 2024).







### 3. Routing algorithm for efficient healthcare

#### Segovia, Castile and León

While 96% of the urban population has access to educational and health services within 15 minutes by foot or bicycle, in rural areas, this percentage drops to just 12%. On average, rural inhabitants must travel 22 kilometers to reach a health center—20 kilometers more than their urban counterparts.

This is the province that researchers from the Open University of Catalonia (UOC), the Autonomous University of Barcelona (UAB) and the Technical University of Valencia (UPV) have used to develop an innovative algorithm capable of designing **more efficient routes for medical assistance vehicles** in these municipalities.

Taking into account parameters such as patient priority, visiting times or travel distance, this routing algorithm is able

to plan routes that **reduce the time and cost invested by half**, compared to current routes, which lack coordination and depend on several centres. The model therefore aims to bring primary care services closer to those municipalities in rural areas that do not have a continuous service throughout the week. It is therefore a useful tool when establishing optimal routes that **guarantee coverage and access to healthcare in sparsely populated and dispersed areas**, where the mostly elderly population has difficulty getting to a medical centre (Castillo et al. 2024).



# ITINERANT SERVICES FOR THE COMMUNITY

**A**s previously stated, the lack of basic services is a recurring problem that people living in rural environments continually face. The fact is that not having access to essential services such as the trade of basic products, specialist health care or leisure and cultural services, is a difficulty for everyone who lives in the village, especially the elderly.

In this context, **itinerancy** is conceived as a great opportunity to bring these essential services closer to the rural population. **Businesses and organisations that travel from one rural location to another offering their services** therefore constitute a good alternative that prevents rural residents from having to make long journeys in order to access such vital resources.





# 1. Rural postmen

## Spain

In order to provide a postal service to all citizens of Spain, the Post Office currently has a **network of 6,400 rural postmen**. This network ensures that even the oldest and most isolated generations in rural areas have access to this service.

However, these professionals from the rural world do not limit themselves to delivering letters, but rather **function as true extensions of the Post Offices**, which often do not exist in sparsely populated areas.

Post Office staff therefore offer a **wide range of services and door-to-door operations**. In addition to ordering postal deliveries of any type (whose stamps and packaging can be purchased on the spot), users can make use of their **home banking service** by depositing and withdrawing cash. That is very useful in those places where there are no bank branches; these have dropped from 46,118 in 2008 to 17,748 in 2023. Similarly, residents can pay bills (taxes, fines, electricity, telephone), interact with the Spanish Department of Transport

(e.g., to buy environmental labels), or **even purchase train and lottery tickets**.

In addition, one of the services that these 'mobile offices' frequently offer is friendly and reliable service. Chatting for a while with the residents of the town, helping them with their paperwork or reading a letter out loud to them are other tasks that they often carry out.

In this way, this network of professionals has become an ideal tool in rural Spain that **facilitates daily life in depopulated areas, promotes the financial inclusion of its inhabitants and mitigates unwanted loneliness** (Correos 2022; Llorens 2024).

## 2. Itinerant Programme

### Community of Valencia

In 2021, the Valencian Federation of Municipalities and Provinces together with the **General Directorate of the Valencian Anti-Depopulation Agenda** (AVANT), started the Itinerant Programme. It is a network of itinerant professionals who offer basic services in places at risk of depopulation.

The programme puts professionals who want to offer their services **in contact** with councils interested in receiving them in their town or village. It also provides the **boost and advice** required in order to implement itinerant services that respond to the needs of each municipality.

To date, there are **162 rural municipalities enrolled** in the programme and a variety of services offered: physiotherapy, podiatry, psychology, veterinary medicine, IT, butchery, carpentry, law, consulting, design, hairdressing, beauty treatment and gardening (FVMP, s. f.).





# 3. Traveling Podiatry Programme

## Castile-La Mancha

Since 2001, the Department of Social Welfare of Castile-La Mancha has been collaborating with three **organisations for the elderly** to provide podiatry services in **rural municipalities** in all the provinces of the region where there is no similar service in public centres.

The programme, aimed at **caring for the feet** of elderly people living in rural environments, serves over **50,000 people each year**. It therefore contributes to fostering **good hygiene and health practices**, as well as **preventing the deterioration of mobility** in the ageing rural population, thereby **improving their quality of life**. (Gobierno de Castilla-La Mancha 2022; s. f.-b)



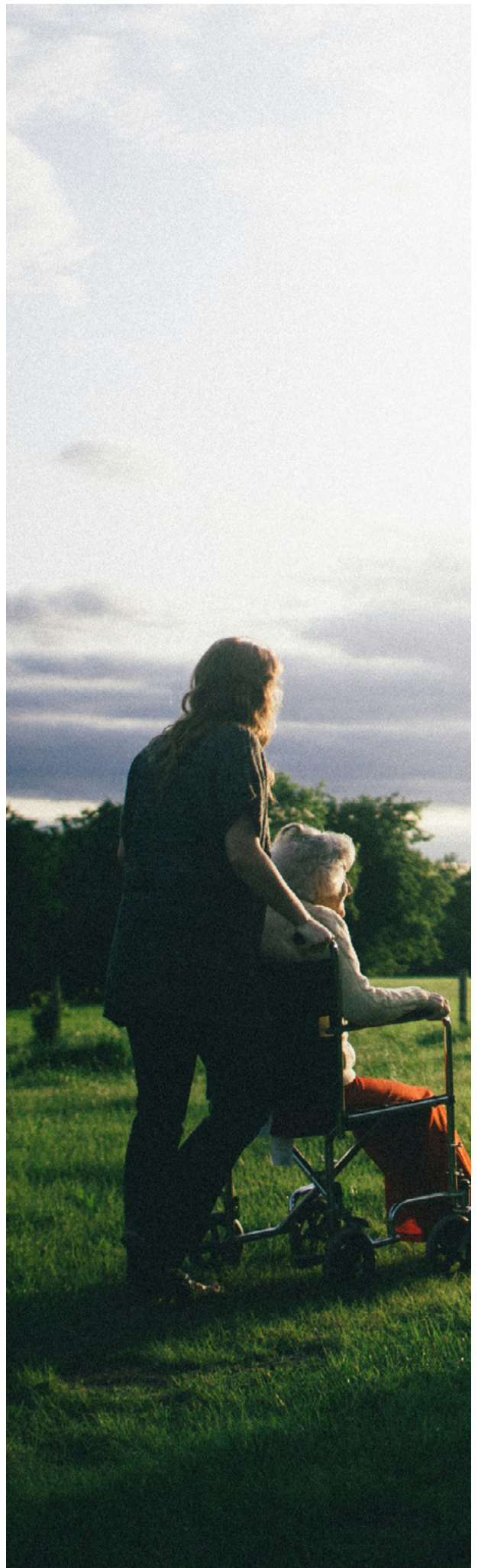
## 4. Door-to-Door Care

### Galicia

**A**s part of the **Home Care Service** of the Xunta de Galicia (Servizo de Axuda no Fogar), which has a budget of 100 million euros per year, the Door-to-Door Care programme was launched in 2022.

This is an initiative that, through mobile units, provides podiatry, audiology and cognitive stimulation services free of charge and at home to people over 55 years of age who require them. These itinerant services travel through rural towns in Galicia, making several visits throughout the year and staying for several days in the same municipality.

In 2022, over 28,000 people benefited from these services (Xunta de Galicia 2022).







# ASSOCIATIONISM AND COOPERATIVISM

**A**ssociationism and cooperativism, as an **alliance between people**, seek to empower their members, **expand their ability to act and the impact** of their joint actions.

In the rural context, and particularly in those territories affected by depopulation, neighbourhood networks play an important role as a **dynamic local feature** by keeping the life of rural communities active (REDR 2021).

The associative movement has **spread to numerous areas of life**, giving rise to associations aimed at promoting different social groups (people with disabilities, the elderly, families, young people, etc.) or focused on different areas, such as the environment, sports, culture and agro-food associations, etc.

For their part, cooperatives enable their members to decide on their financial affairs and, above all, for the social and economic benefits of an activity to remain in the territory.

## 2. Community Resource Bank: Land and Seeds

### Extremadura

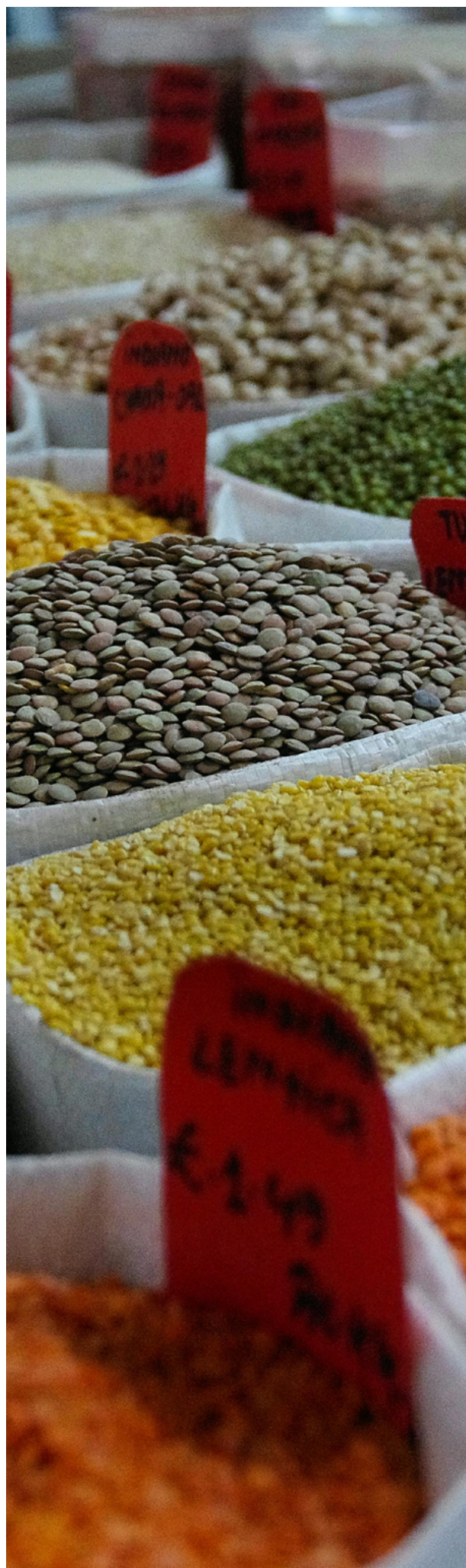
**T**he Community Resource Bank is a project of the **Red Terrae Inter-municipal Association** (Agroecological Reserve Territories Network), which since 2018 has been working in order to revitalize unused farms and lands, while focusing on seeds at risk of disappearing. Any City Council or local Corporation in Extremadura can become a member and participate.

On the one hand, the **land bank** offers a database of unused plots, farms or lands that are offered in this network of Extremadura municipalities so that they can be used by people interested in working them.

On the other hand, the **seed bank** is part of a network of “seed guardians”, who tend to them and ensure that they are not neglected and unused. Through this platform, these people can connect with each other and exchange seeds to grow.

This is how the project aims to promote and enable the agroecological use of unused lands and seeds at risk of disappearing, as well as to boost socio-environmental and educational opportunities in the **agroecological sector** (Pueblos Vivos 2020).

Access the Community Resource Bank [here](#).







# UNWANTED LONELINESS

**T**here is ample scientific evidence supporting the **relationship between social support and health**. Social support can be understood as the perception of being loved, valued and/or cared for by other people as part of a 'social network', and usually involves partners, family, friends, colleagues, acquaintances and even pets.

**In old age, this support fosters well-being, emotional security and identity**, since having a social network encourages participation in activities that help maintain physical and cognitive functioning.

**Loneliness**, understood as the perception of not having an environment to turn to or trust in when needed (lack of social support), can therefore have serious consequences for both physical and mental health. For example, loneliness increases dependency and the risk of suffering from neurodegenerative diseases; it reduces functional capacity and life expectancy.

Loneliness, although it can be experienced at any stage of life, is something that increases with age. It is estimated that in Spain, almost **40% of people over 65 suffer from loneliness**, and that half of people over 80 lack a network of friends to rely on.

This is **particularly the case in small rural areas affected by depopulation**, since it leads to the loss of the neighbourhood support network and activities that traditionally entailed stable social connections with friends, acquaintances and family (patron saint festivals, bars and walks, etc.)(Junta de Castilla y León 2022).

In addition to the unwanted loneliness experienced by the elderly, young people are also victims of this problem. According to the study on Youth and Unwanted Loneliness in Spain (2023), 25.5% of young people aged 16-29 years in Spain currently feel lonely.

# 1. MOAI Labs

Europe: Spain, France,  
Portugal

**M**OAI Labs: Collective Intelligence and Socio-Health Technology Laboratories to combat isolation and loneliness in the elderly was a **European R&D&I project** (Interreg Sudoe programme) that was carried out between 2020 and 2023 with the aim of attracting business investment in **innovative solutions to combat unwanted loneliness**.

It was implemented in Spain, Portugal and France, and concluded with an extensive study of the current situation and policies on loneliness. During the duration of the project, **awareness** campaigns were launched, innovative and **multi-sector** solutions were tested, and **action guides**, compilations of **good practices**, strategies and **tools** were developed in order to address the problem.

The project won the award in the European **Territorial Co-operation** category of the ERDF Funds in 2022 (moailabs.eu, s. f.).





# 2. “CountOnMe” Programme and Action Plan against unwanted loneliness

## Castile and León

**T**hroughout 2019, with the support of the Junta of Castile and León, Intergenerational Solidarity created **21 “CuentaConmigo” neighbourhood associations** in rural towns with **fewer than 2,000 inhabitants** spread across 9 provinces of the Autonomous Community.

The aim of these **intergenerational** neighbourhood networks was to combat unwanted loneliness by forming bonds and participating in frequent meetings and joint activities (Solidaridad Intergeneracional 2019).

In Castile and León, this took the form of the **Action Plan against unwanted loneliness and social isolation 2022-2025**. The Plan is divided into three areas:

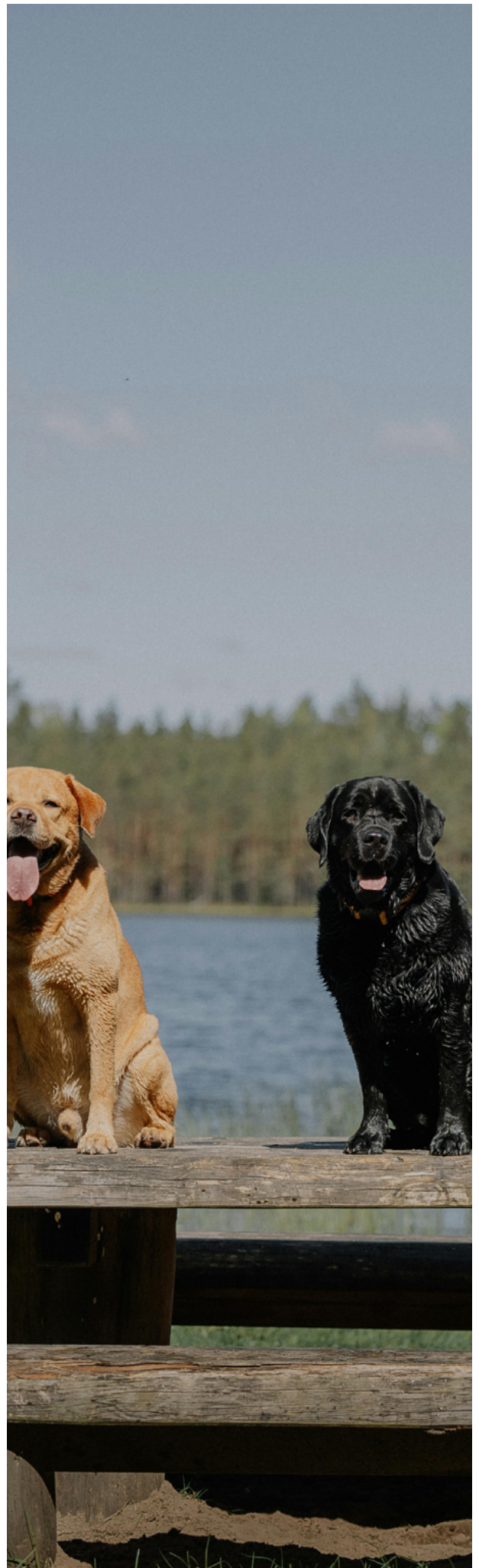
- Prevention, awareness, information and communication.
- Intervention and support for the person to develop and maintain social relationships.
- The development of accessible and friendly meeting spaces with people who facilitate interpersonal relationships.



The Plan also highlights the portfolio of services to combat unwanted loneliness developed by the Community Board:

- **Telecare service:** a proactive prevention and monitoring service in situations of loneliness and isolation.
- **A Comprehensive Active Ageing Programme,** which also includes the Shared Accommodation Programme, Associationism Campaign, the Interuniversity Experience Programme and the “60s Club” travel programmes.
- **Online service.** It is divided into three programmes: “Comfy at home”, “Networked housing” and “In my house” (“We think about you” in Palencia) (Junta de Castilla y León 2022).

“**Living with Pets**” is one of the many initiatives launched against unwanted loneliness in Castile and León. The initiative, part of the Active Ageing programme of the Valladolid County Council, is aimed at people over 60 in the province. The project consists of a phase of raising awareness about the benefits of living with domestic animals for those who experience negative feelings of loneliness. The second phase is about supporting people interested in choosing, adopting and adapting them to their home (Diputación de Valladolid, s. f.).







## 3. “Friday” Programme

### Campoo-Los Valles and Saja-Nansa, Cantabria

**F**riday is a pilot programme for the **prevention of social isolation and unwanted loneliness in rural areas**. The Campoo Los Valles Territorial Development Association and the Cantabrian Rural Development Network collaborate in its implementation, with funding from European **Next Generation** funds, as part of component 22, “Emergency plan for the care economy and strengthening inclusion policies” of the Recovery, Transformation and Resilience Plan.

Since 2022, the programme has been rolled out in the 16 municipalities of the Campoo Los Valles ADT area of action, and from 2024 it will also start in the Saja Nansa region. “Friday” is based on 10 basic factors: **rurality, community, personalization and flexibility, intergenerationality, gender perspective, participation, care, professionalism, coordination and evaluability**. These foundations are put into practice through actions at different levels of intervention:

- First, exhaustive **social research** was carried out: a **diagnostic** phase to understand the reality of loneliness in the rural Cantabrian territory.

- On the basis of this assessment of experiences of loneliness in the rural world, different **community programmes** were designed and implemented.
- First, **awareness-raising** days were held in schools and staff **training** was provided. These activities were aimed at understanding unwanted loneliness and generating a social commitment to this phenomenon.
- Then, in order to encourage **intergenerational encounters** and strengthen neighbourhood ties, **group activities** have been organised in the different municipalities for those at greater risk of finding themselves in a situation of loneliness. These community interventions therefore aim to promote **support networks**.
- In addition to all these initiatives, the programme offers **support and personalised service** for those people who experience feelings of unwanted loneliness (Programa Viernes 2024).

# 4.

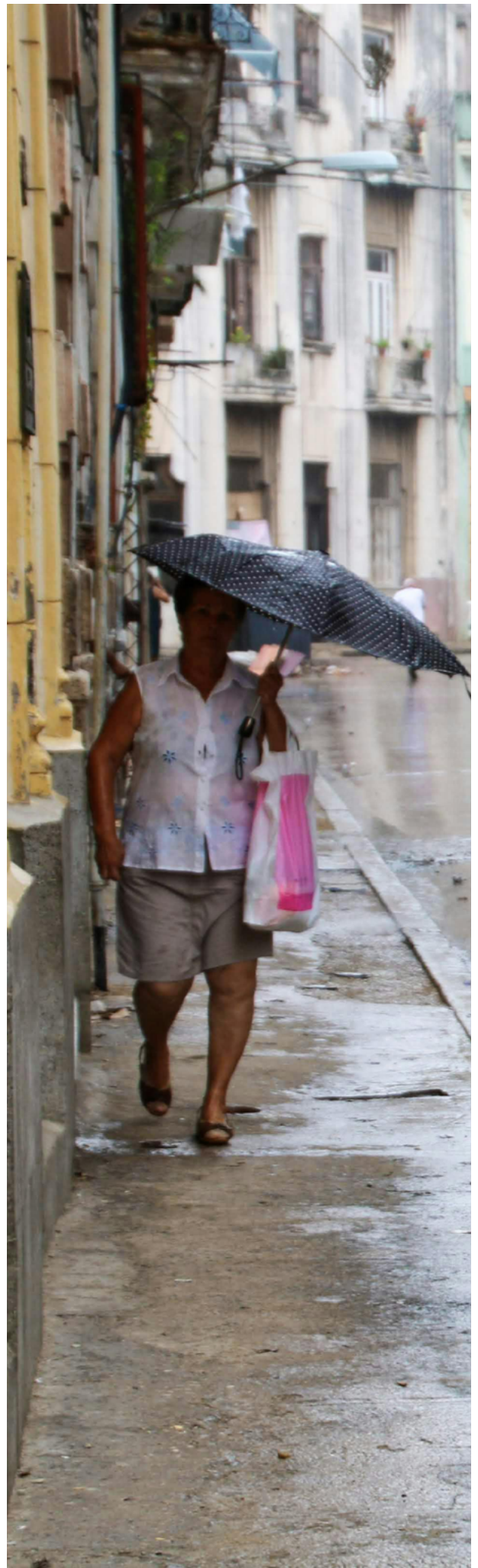
## Neighbourhood Self-Care Network: Deza Brand

Deza, Soria. Castile and León

**D**eza is one of the small agricultural villages in Campo de Gómara, a region of Soria devastated by **population loss and ageing**, and where health resources are also scarce.

That is why, in 2021, the community nurse Yolanda Lapeña, who works across the towns and villages of the region, began to develop the idea of creating a **neighbourhood self-care network**. This is how the 'Neighbourhood Self-Care Deza Brand' began. It received the Research Award from the Soria Health Care Management Board.

The network comprises over a dozen women between 60 and 86 and carries out different activities such as **walks, workshops and memory games**. It focuses on promoting healthy habits and eating, the value of memory, mobility and free time activities in order to achieve **active aging**, strengthening ties between neighbours and **maintaining physical and mental health in rural areas** (El Día de Soria 2022).





# 5. Intergenerational Co-habitation

International: Spain, France,  
Portugal, Belgium, Japan,  
USA

**T**hrough group **activities and the experiences of cohabitation between older people and younger generations**, Intergenerational Programmes foster personal, social and emotional development, as well as enrich the quality of life of the people involved.

This type of programme first emerged in the United States in the 1960s, although it did not begin to develop in Europe until the end of the 1990s. They were finally consolidated in 1999 with the creation of the **International Consortium for Intergenerational Programmes** of the UN.

This is a type of intergenerational programme that promotes **active ageing and social participation** by the elderly through co-habitation. Intergenerational Cohabitation is a practice that has been replicated in different places around the world. It is based on older people who live alone and have a spare room in their home, renting it at low prices to students or young workers. In addition, both generations are asked to meet several times a week to share at least one meal. These programmes are usually promoted by public entities and non-profit organizations, which are responsible for putting the two parties in contact and monitoring their cohabitation. In this way, solutions are offered to both **unwanted loneliness and the lack of decent housing among young people**

(Centro Residencial de Mayores «La Minería» 2016).

Some examples in Spain include the “CONVIVE” Programme offered by the Madrid City Council, the “viure i conviure” Programme of the Roure Foundation in Barcelona and surrounding areas, and the Shared Inter-generational Accommodation Programme run by the socially-responsible business Kuvu, in Biscay.

Consult the intergenerational cohabitation programmes offered by the different Communities [here](#).

Other examples around the world include the Aconchego Programme run by the City Council, the Academic Federation in Porto (Portugal) and the Ensemble2générations Association, which facilitates intergenerational co-habitation through over 30 agencies throughout France. In Belgium, the non-profit organisation 1Toit2Ages has helped 4,616 pairs of people to co-habit since 2009, while in Tokyo (Japan), the NGO Matching Hongo manages the “Under One Roof” project.

See more intergenerational co-habitation programmes in Europe and the USA [here](#).

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