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WELL-BEING, WORK AND VITAL TRAJECTORIES IN RURAL AREAS

**BETWEEN ROOTS AND FLIGHT: HOUSING AND RURAL DEPOPULATION
IN PALENCIA, SPAIN**

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Rural depopulation is often less a “choice” than an almost inevitable outcome of living conditions. Structurally, there is simply no adequate residential space in rural communities for those who want to stay. Housing has become one of the most pressing social and territorial challenges in Europe, and Spain is not an exception. Beyond urban affordability, rural areas face a quieter but equally decisive housing problem: limited access to dwellings that are both available and habitable. This increasingly shapes whether people — especially young adults and households in transition — can remain in, or return to, rural communities. This paper examines housing as a structural condition for population retention in the province of Palencia, northern Spain. Using qualitative multiple case studies, three experiences built on different intervention logics were analyzed: two public housing initiatives, and a project carried out by a rural development center to mobilize existing vacant housing through local intermediation. To collect data,

this research combines document review and in-depth semi-structured interviews with institutional actors and rural residents. A thematic analysis was carried out focusing on territorial context, rootedness and expectations, rural housing conditions and habitability, and the scope and limits of housing policies.

Results point to a recurring paradox: the presence of housing stock does not ensure real access to it. Deficiencies in habitability, aging buildings, inheritance constraints, scarce rental supply, and high renovation costs keep dwellings effectively “out of the market”. Public housing promotion can make easier pathways, but its impact remains limited without sustained funding and strong local management. Meanwhile, initiatives to mobilize vacant housing can activate supply faster, but they depend on close mediation, legal certainty, and support for renovation. Youth narratives consistently show willingness to stay. However, available and habitable housing is missing — making residential access a cornerstone for tackling rural depopulation.

Palavras-chave: rural housing; depopulation; public housing development; rural development; multiple case studies.