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# **Is employment a key factor for demographic settling down? A socio- occupational approach to foreign migration in basque rural areas (Spain)**

**Beatriz Izquierdo Ramírez**

Profesora Contratado Doctor. Universidad de Burgos

bizquierdo@ubu.es

<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-0137-8182>

**Julia Shershneva**

Profesora Adjunta. Universidad del País Vasco (UPV-EHU)

julia.shershneva@ehu.es

<https://orcid.org/0000-0003-3098-9991>

**Patricia Campelo Martínez**

Profesora Agregada. Universidad del País Vasco (UPV-EHU)

patricia.campelo@ehu.es

<https://orcid.org/0000-0001-8769-2342>



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## ARTICLE SECTION

### **Is employment a key factor for demographic settling down? A socio- occupational approach to foreign migration in basque rural areas (Spain)**

*Abstract:* This paper analyses the presence of international migrant population in the Basque rural areas for the last two decades with the aim of understand their sociodemographic and labour profile, and estimate the sustainability of their migration project which might fluctuate depending on the economic cycle. For that, the research studies the main characteristics of this group and adds some comparisons with the international migrants living in Basque urban areas with the purpose of knowing if there are distinguishing features. Having in mind the same purpose, the labour situation of rural international migrant population is compared with the rural overall ones. The methodological approach focuses on a statistical analysis that has been elaborated ad hoc for this research. The results show that international migrant population presents a huge potential for reversing depopulation and revitalizing the most declining rural areas. They became a group with a significant presence of support generation, being young and gender balanced. However, the analysis also reflects a segmented labour market depending on the origin of population which is, besides, unequal in labour conditions and regarding the working activities foreign population occupy. A situation that might unbalances the sustainability of a longer term stay.

*Key words:* International migration, rural areas, labour migration, Basque Country

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## IDEAS CLAVE / HIGHLIGHTS / IDEES CLAU

1. La presencia de migración de origen extranjero oscila en función del ciclo económico.
2. La crisis económica ha modificado el perfil y la actividad laboral de este colectivo
3. Las actividades laborales de la población rural de origen extranjero y autóctono difieren sustancialmente
4. Las ocupaciones de la migración rural de origen extranjero son más precarias y volátiles.
5. Las condiciones laborales más inestables de este colectivo cuestionan la sostenibilidad de su proyecto migratorio

1. The presence of international migration in Basque rural areas depends on the economic cycle.
2. The economic crisis has modified the working activity of this group.
3. The labour activity profile of international migration and locals in rural areas differs substantially
4. The employment of the rural international migration is more precarious and volatile.
5. The most unstable working conditions of this group enquires the sustainability of the migration project.

1. La presència de migració d'origen estranger oscil·la en funció del cicle econòmic.
2. La crisi econòmica ha modificat el perfil i l'activitat d'aquest col·lectiu.
3. Les activitats laborals de la població rural d'origen estranger i autòcton difereixen substancialment.
4. Les ocupacions de la migració rural d'origen estranger són més precàries i volàtils.
5. Les condicions laborals més inestables d'aquest col·lectiu qüestionen la sostenibilitat del projecte migratori.

## EXTENDED ABSTRACT<sup>1</sup>

The aim of this paper is to present the main results of a quantitative study focused on the sociodemographic profile and labour market situation of the foreign-born population that has settled in Basque rural areas over the last two decades. The increase of migrant residents and their role in rural municipalities is an interesting topic due to the socioeconomic impact that the arrival of this group has on these areas, and in addition it is a topic that is somewhat unexplored in the Basque context.

This research also reflects the huge potential of this group for slowing the process of depopulation and revitalizing rural areas, especially in those municipalities most affected by depopulation: recent statistics examined show a group whose average age is under 35 and gender balanced. Besides this, one main characteristic is heterogeneity regarding the origin of this population, the most significant groups proceeding from Morocco and South America.

Thus, Basque rural areas provide a very interesting scenario for studying the sociological dynamics connected to the migrant population and its social and economic integration into the territory. Concerning the period studied, several changes have taken place, not only in the social field but also at the economic and labour level, contributing in certain respects to the transformation and diversity of Basque rural areas.

However, the results concerning the position of migrants in the labour market are probably one of the main contributions of this study, providing a fundamental perspective for understanding the social and economic impact of this group on rural areas. Different studies demonstrate how over the last twenty years these areas have been generating employment opportunities not only in the agrarian sector but also (and mainly) in the service sector. The research therefore shows that labour motivation proves to be the main reason for migrants installing themselves in these places, although this is strongly dependent on the economic cycle, with the crisis of 2008 and subsequent years having significant effects, which are also studied in this research.

Different hypotheses are posited: the first hypothesis is that labour motivation is the main factor triggering the migration project; a second hypothesis is connected to the sociodemographic profile of migrants, with the purpose of knowing whether this varies between rural and urban areas; a third hypothesis shows how market segmentation is connected to the migrant workers' place of birth.

The investigation uses a quantitative methodological approach based on secondary data provided by the Basque Statistical authorities and obtained ad hoc for this study; concretely, the principal population and labour statistics were examined. On the one hand, to construct the demographic characterization, continuous Population Censuses for the years 2019, 2016, 2011, 2006 and 2001 were analyzed, as well other data proceeding from the Basque Statistical Institute. It is relevant to consider the entire period in order to obtain a broader perspective on migration at different stages: the years prior to the massive influx of migrants (2001), the period before the economic crisis (2006), the effects of that crisis (2011), the decline in migration to rural areas (2016) and, finally, the most recent data available, with the aim of obtaining the most up-to-date scenario.

Regarding their representation in the labour market, population, not municipality, was taken into account as a unit of analysis, to try to avoid statistical overrepresentation. All the data were examined on the basis of three main variables: gender, age and country or

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<sup>1</sup> Traducción exclusiva de los autores / Authors' exclusive translation.

continent of birth. In some cases, it was considered interesting for the purpose of the study to establish a comparison between the foreign-born population and the local population.

The results show how labour motivation is the main factor for arriving in rural areas, confirming the first hypothesis, while the data indicates that, compared to other studies, departure from rural areas following the crisis was delayed and the migrant population “resisted” for longer in rural territories, probably due to lower prices. The data clearly reflect the progressive increase of the migrant population in Basque rural areas over the last two decades; however that evolution has oscillated, showing a certain discontinuity, and has been marked by the crisis and economic recovery. In effect, the weight of the economic situation and, particularly, the increase of labour opportunities becomes clear. The data explored accurately reflect how the arrival of the migrant population ties in with the years of a very positive economic dynamic in Spain, with a reduction of these population flows resulting from the economic crisis after the year 2008. However, it is very interesting to observe how prior to that situation the data on arrival in rural and urban areas develop in parallel and are very similar. This dynamic, however, is not maintained in the post-crisis period: following the year 2017 rural areas again recover their foreign-born population although later than urban areas.

Regarding the second and third hypotheses, in connection with the labour market and the comparative situation of the foreign-born and the local populations, the results highlight two very dissimilar labour scenarios that flow in parallel, with some of the reflections obtained proving to be very interesting. Together with migrant women having a less representative role in the legal labour market, the high unemployment rate amongst migrants, which affects women to a greater extent, is very relevant. This imbalance can be observed again within the working population. Thus, the analysis shows that the labour conditions are much more asymmetric and volatile. In the case of foreign-born men, their jobs are inserted in precarious sectors such as agrarian activity as well as construction. Regarding women, the percentage of those working in the care sector, tourism and the catering sector is very significant. Indeed, the extraordinary rate of women employed in the care sector reflects the vulnerability of women’s jobs and – of greater relevance – questions the real dimension of these kinds of jobs, taking into account the shadow economy within this particular activity. This situation is especially relevant in the case of elderly care, a form of work that is mainly developed by South American women. Many of these women have no work or residence permits, and it is easier to avoid legal control in rural localities.

This information contrasts with the job activities of local people that present, a priori, much more stable labour conditions: a high rate of men work in industry, presenting much better working conditions, while women have a high representation in education, the health sector and the public administration. These data reflect the singularity of Basque rural areas, showing that although employment in the agrarian sector is becoming increasingly reduced, it is the migrant population (mainly people from the Maghreb) that is working in that sector, mostly oriented to basic activities in wine production.

Finally, the study calls for the development of a qualitative analysis, combined with the quantitative ones, in order to know the work histories and narratives of foreign-born people in rural areas. This would undoubtedly contribute a complementary perspective to the research that has been realized.