



Council of the
European Union

Brussels, 26 February 2019
(OR. es)

6871/19

ENV 219
SOC 164
DEVGEN 39
AGRI 102

NOTE

From: General Secretariat of the Council
To: Delegations

Subject: Environmental protection policies to combat depopulation in rural areas
and to improve quality of life
- Information from the Spanish delegation

Delegations will find attached a note from the Spanish delegation on the above subject, which will be discussed among the 'any other business' items at the Environment Council meeting on 5 March 2019.

Environmental protection policies to combat depopulation in rural areas and to improve quality of life

- Information from the Spanish delegation -

Depopulation of rural areas is a growing phenomenon in Europe, as shown by the report 'Shrinking rural regions in Europe', produced by ESPON (European Spatial Planning Observation Network) with co-financing from the ERDF. The study emphasises that the loss of population in rural areas is especially marked in the Nordic countries and in southern Europe. In Spain, the effects of rural depopulation are obvious and worsening over time; they also show a lack of opportunities, prospects and services in the areas affected.

This process gives rise to dissatisfaction and discontent in regions which feel left out of the dynamics of development and the action priorities of the public authorities, and it is therefore essential to design broad-based strategies to resolve the problems and attract population to, and retain it in, the areas affected. Spain is working on a National Strategy for the Demographic Challenge to address these issues, which the Government plans to adopt in the second quarter of 2019.

At the same time, the rural world brings notable environmental benefits, in terms of protection of biodiversity and natural areas, conservation of the landscape, production of wholesome and healthy food, provision of ecosystem services, such as high-quality air and water, and areas for recreation, among others.

In this connection, an effort must be made to promote its environmental assets as a contribution to generating economic and social opportunities in the areas concerned.

To this end, public environmental policies must be framed to maximise the benefits and offer opportunities to the rural population while improving their quality of life. In this regard, preserving species of fauna and flora and conserving natural areas is not just an obligation but also an opportunity for governments committed to acting to counter the global loss of biodiversity. This opportunity needs to be taken by developing new niches for activity and job creation which will help to retain population in rural areas.

The natural riches of many areas - of which we have clear examples in Spain - present great potential for nature tourism, which should benefit local economies, through both the service sector and the primary sector, and through job creation.

The European Union is by no means exempt from the challenge of preserving biodiversity, since half of the species of wild birds are at risk and only 16 % of habitats have favourable conservation status.

And this situation exists despite the fact that the European Union has well-known legal provisions and instruments for protecting natural areas, such as the Natura 2000 network, as well as major financial instruments which can contribute to achieving synergies between environmental protection and attracting activity and population to rural areas, such as the CAP, the European Social Fund, the regional policy instruments or, on a smaller scale, the LIFE programme.

The challenge now is to identify new opportunities in this field and to reinforce policies and instruments so that environmental protection can offer new prospects for rural areas affected by depopulation. And this must be done in a participative way, so that the populations and regions concerned can make their voice heard and feel involved in this process.

Reflecting on this problem and the contribution which environmental policy can make is especially relevant at the present time. Here the European Commission, the Member States and the regions can contribute valuable ideas.

The European Union will soon be drawing up its strategies for the coming years in a number of areas. The Sibiu summit on the future of Europe cannot fail to take account of the environmental challenges and the difficulties facing some regions in the Union affected by depopulation, which often feel that the benefits of the process of European integration do not reach them. The discussions on the Multiannual Financial Framework are also an opportunity to identify priorities for the use of the Union's financial instruments in the years ahead. Once again, it is essential to take into account, in this debate, the need to achieve territorially balanced development in which nature conservation initiatives which contribute to retaining population in rural areas are adequately funded. Lastly, the future Environment Action Programme also represents an opportunity to place at the centre of the Union's environmental strategies the role which can be played by the conservation of biodiversity and the protection of ecosystems in attracting population to areas at risk of being depopulated.
