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# **A case study on the revitalisation of shrinking Spain: Migrant reception in rural areas**

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### ***Abstract***

This paper builds upon the growing European political interest in countering rural areas' depopulation and shrinking trends through rural immigration. Since rural areas' peripheral characteristics may hinder the host society's receptivity capacity and migrants' revitalising potential, this paper raises the question: What factors influence the receptivity of migration to rural areas and its potential for revitalisation? which is addressed with a pilot case study focusing on Aragón's County of Jiloca (Central Spain), where an integration project took place between 2021-22. Based on ethnographic fieldwork, the study preliminary finds that rural areas' community's proactivity, strong coordination and social proximity factors favour receptivity. However, social control and challenging structural factors (housing, employment, services, connectivity) hinder rural receptivity capacity. Simultaneously, prevalent socioeconomic inequalities and racism hamper migrants' revitalising potential. The study finally advocates for a synergy between rural revitalisation and receptivity and uncovers the long-standing role of rural areas in migration management.

### ***Keywords***

Migration, rural areas, revitalisation, receptivity, depopulation.

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### ***Author's biographical note***



Iris Egea is a 2022 graduate of GRITIM-UPF's Migration Studies Master's Degree. Her Master's Thesis, which this working paper elaborates on, was awarded as the third most outstanding Migration Studies Master's Thesis during the academic year 2021-22. Iris is currently a Project Technician at Barcelona's Fundació Ibn Battuta, which provides support to migrants for full, inclusive and real citizenship. Her interests lie in questions of race and the arising cultural and social dynamics upon migrants' reception in countries of destination with a postcolonial perspective. Iris has disseminated her research at several conferences, the most recent being "Measuring Migration: How? When? Why?" at Oxford University where she called for the collection of race statistics in population registers in Europe to address structural racism and prevailing inequalities.

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## 1. Introduction

Although over half of the foreign-born population in Europe is still concentrated in urban areas, immigration into rural areas is now gaining momentum in the European political agenda. In response to the depopulation trend of rural areas, immigration is considered an essential source for revitalisation (Stockdale, 2006). Indeed, Eurostat (2016) projects that by 2050 the European rural population is predicted to decrease by 7.9 million inhabitants. This longstanding shrinking process has gained urgency with the COVID-19 pandemic as it has exacerbated the increasing vulnerabilities of rural areas.

In Spain, the Ministry of Inclusion has openly stated that “the future of rural Spain is in the hands of immigration” (Ministerio de Inclusión, 2020) as a recent study conducted by La Caixa discovered that foreign-born individuals comprise 10% of the total Spanish rural population (Tolosa, 2020). The pushing interest is also advanced by EU multi-level governance through projects that encourage rural immigration and the bulk of migration management is re-scaled to the local level (Schmidtke, 2014).

While often matched by the host community’s wish for revival, these interests focus solely on migrants’ role and disregard the receiving community’s ultimate task in such efforts. Indeed, rural areas’ scarce structures may contribute to poorer reception capacities and undermine migrants’ revitalising potential. While this may be unconsidered at higher levels, receptivity remains key in exhausting migrants’ revitalising capability. Additionally, while this sudden political interest – matched by rising research attention – may portray rural immigration as a new phenomenon, rural areas have had a long-standing role as immigration destinations (Barberis & Pavolini, 2018).

This paper aims to contribute to such a growing engagement and reflect on the link between rural receptivity and revitalisation by focusing on the important role that civil society organisations play in rural areas. The analysis will acquire a dual dimension where both the host community and external migrants will acquire a relevant role. Thus, the driving question of this study is: *What factors influence the receptivity of migration to rural areas and its potential for revitalisation?*

The more concrete aims of the study are:

1. Explore the process of rural receptivity; the analytical focus here will not be limited to the structural and political elements, but also include the ‘native community’.
2. Examine the factors easing and hindering rural immigration’s revitalising potential.

To answer that question, a pilot study has been conducted on Aragón’s County of Jiloca (Central Spain), where an integration project was carried out by PSICARA’s civil society association in Jiloca between 2021-22. The project was set within the framework of the cross-country EU-funded initiative Share SIRA (Strengthening Integration in Rural Areas) – in line with the EU multi-level governance tradition – and aimed to favour European rural areas’ integrating potential through cross-regional cooperation within the framework of rural development and revitalisation. The analysis will strive to examine the receptivity and revitalisation factors of the region and how this local project addressed the area’s potential for reception and revitalisation.<sup>1</sup>

Overall, the study intends to contribute to the wider political and social debates in different ways. First, it seeks to highlight the proactive role of rural areas, often overshadowed by urban and nationally-focused political agendas. The second objective is to convey the importance of building receptivity capacity as a prerequisite of immigrant welcoming efforts and migrants’ revitalisation. In this reception, not only are structural factors of concern but also the entire community – where non-governmental actors, such as civil society initiatives, will be valorised. The end goal is to contribute to shaping a rural migration management approach that addresses both receptivity and revitalisation simultaneously, thus creating a synergy between the two.

The theoretical framework will review the existing literature on the subject by analysing the main theories and critically addressing the gaps found to shape this paper’s main contributions to research. Following that, the case study will be introduced. In this chapter, the sources and methodology will be presented first, followed by the application of the pilot study. After that, the main empirical findings will be addressed. Finally, the conclusion will list the final remarks based on the research limits and future research lines.

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<sup>1</sup> Although Share SIRA’s pilot project took place between January 2021 and December 2022, this paper addresses it in the present tense. With that, the paper seeks to respect the will and content of the original research and analysis, which was conducted when the project was still ongoing and no conclusive results had been reached yet.

## **2. Theoretical framework: Existent literature & potential contributions**

### ***2.1. Introduction to the main literature debates on rural migration***

Rural migration has remained underdeveloped in European academia until recently (Collantes et al., 2014, Barberis & Pavolini, 2015). Urban settings have received the main focus as immigrant getaways due to the prevailing methodological nationalism – whose attention is on the nation-state as the main unit of analysis and ignores other contexts of migration – in migration studies (Wimmer & Schiller, 2002).

The interest in rural settings sparked earlier in the United States in the mid-1990s, when the debate on the NIDs (New Immigration Destinations) was born (Caponio & Pettrachin, 2021). The concept refers to areas with poor prior experience with migration (McArevey & Argent, 2018). The study of NIDs in Europe has recently surged by focusing on refugee settlement (McArevey & Argent, 2018). Nevertheless, the use of the term NIDs might be misleading and conceal a demographic reality that has characterised rural areas for longer. European rural areas have been the stage for ‘counter-urbanisation’ since the 1970s and international migration for the last twenty years (Kasmis, 2010).

*Rural areas* have a contested definition in the European context as they are measured differently across countries. Nevertheless, this paper will take Eurostat’s demographic definition, following the groundings of other research papers (Haselbacher & Segarra, 2021; Barberis & Pavolini, 2015). Accordingly, rural areas are found outside of urban clusters and have approximately up to 5,000 inhabitants with a population density of fewer than 300 inhabitants/Km<sup>2</sup> (European Commission, 2022).

Having reflected on the driving definition of rural areas for this paper, the main debates arising from the developing research on immigration to rural areas tackle (1) the structural particularities of these spaces, i.e., spatial, socioeconomic, demographic and cultural, (2) the interaction between migrants and native community (3) the local governance, and (4) migrants’ impact on the receiving society. However, several gaps have been found. After addressing the debates, the limits of the existing literature will be critically addressed to clearly state the expected contributions of this paper.

The above-listed debates connect to the widely studied migrant integration. Notwithstanding, most traditional research on the process of integration has ultimately focused on migrants’ role. Therefore, the term receptivity is deemed suitable for analysis to expand the

attention to the receiving society too. It is especially relevant in the rural context vis-à-vis revitalisation as the latter cannot be promoted without the prior openness of the host society (Arora-Jonsson, 2017). That same will is precisely behind Glorius et al.'s (2021) development of the analytical framework of *receptivity*. They define it as “the ability and willingness to open up to newcomers and develop an inclusionary perspective within a local society” (p. 56). They establish three dimensions to receptivity, i.e., the structural frame, political actors and governance structures. The structural frame refers to the prerequisites of reception where the existence of local resources and the economic and demographic conditions are central. The second represents the municipal competencies and political positions and proactivity. The third dimension highlights the context's specific social capital, collective memory and local migration history. Glorius et al.'s framework will be used in this paper to address rural receptivity.

*a) Debate I: Structural particularities of rural areas*

The rural areas' receptivity capacity is hindered by their limited structural resources (i.e., communication availability, social services, job opportunities, education), which in turn threaten the existence of local societies (Caponio, Donatiello & Pozo, 2022). Authors also warn of the lack of available rental housing in rural areas (Maynard et al., 2009; Weidinger & Korden, 2020) and scarce accessibility (Barberis & Pavolini, 2015). That connects with the role of the spatial location and implies the possibility of the creation of rural ghettos and spatial segregation (Barberis and Pavolini, 2015).

Linked to the threatened existence of local societies is the notion of depopulation, defined by the CEDDAR (Centre for Studies on Depopulation and Development of Rural Areas) in a report on rural depopulation in Spain (2016) as “a demographic and territorial phenomenon consisting of a decrease in the number of inhabitants in a territory or nucleus relative to a previous period” (p. 2) due to negative natural growth – triggered by a higher ratio of deaths than births – or to negative net migration – when emigration is higher than immigration – or both simultaneously.

Additionally, also within Glorius et al.'s receptivity's first dimension, rural areas are often described as homogeneous cultural spaces with limited diversity (Barberis & Pavolini, 2015; Glorius et al., 2020). However, this misleadingly contributes to the literature that mistakenly shapes rural areas as NIDs. In that respect, Holloway (2007) brings forward the critique of the 'rural idyll' and its romantic representations of homogeneity that privilege particular rural

identities while concealing the experiences of rural Others. The rural idyll is deep-rooted in the politics of rural settings. However, while most literature sheds light on the stagnant nature of rural areas, some studies have revalorised rural settings as driven actors in globalisation furnishing flows of capital, people and ideas (Woods, 2007), hence being interconnected with other urban settings (McAreevey & Argent, 2018).

*b) Debate II: Interaction between migrant and native populations*

Concerning Glorius et al.'s third frame and the specific contextual social capital, two hypotheses for interaction have been explored by Barberis and Pavolini (2015). The most optimistic hypothesis follows the characteristic that the strong-weak ties and social proximity of rural settings foster quicker incorporation (Barberis & Pavolini, 2015; Glorius et al., 2020). The small scale of the rural setting also implies that migrants have limited social networks (McAreevey & Argent, 2018). Consequently, they are expected to establish contacts with the host community quicker (Glorius et al., 2020). Social resources have also been found paramount in accessing the rural housing market, whereby rental mediators, such as friends and relatives share important information (Weidinger & Kordel, 2020). Shared facilities like schools and community centres are found effective in promoting interaction and offsetting segregation (McAreevey & Argent, 2018).

Nonetheless, social proximity shapes a more pessimist theory, that of hindered incorporation and slow social mobility. Because of the lack of co-ethnic support and natives' strong social bonding capital, the latter may force strict criteria of belonging (Barberis & Pavolini, 2015) and have high degrees of social control. Consequently, migrants are forced to assimilate into the local behaviour and customs, being subject to 'otherness' and hostile attitudes (Glorius et al., 2020).

While research acknowledges the impact that the native community has on migrants, the role of the native population has been poorly scrutinised (Glorius et al., 2020). Some attempts to bring their role to the fore are the contact hypothesis, based on sustained contact (Allport, 1954), and the WoC (Whole-of-Community) approach, where post-2014 migrants are differentiated (Carponio & Pettrachin, 2021). Both are based on an (inter)cultural perspective (Lundsteen, 2022). Nonetheless, they miss capturing the prevailing power asymmetries that stem from socioeconomic and race hierarchies (Matejskova & Leitner, 2011; Lundsteen, 2022).

*c) Debate III: Local governance*

Regarding local governance and hence Glorius et al.'s second dimension, studies generally highlight the role of the mayor and the local implementation of national policies (Schmidtke, 2014; Sampedro & Camarero, 2018; Careja, 2019). Yet, in spaces that are characterised by social proximity, other actors are important in receptivity efforts (Caponio et al., 2022). Thus, the role of the third sector, i.e., social workers, voluntary and non-governmental organisations, has been mostly scrutinised within rural contexts (Schmidtke, 2014; Sampedro & Camarero, 2018; Careja, 2019; Caponio et al., 2022). However, the analyses mostly target the incorporation of refugees.

Indeed, Glorius et al.'s study (2020) on refugees in rural Germany has found that non-governmental actors are more easily self-organised as they succeed at responding to locally specific needs (Schmidtke, 2014). Careja's (2019) research in Odense, a city in Denmark, claims that the third sector entails a process of layering of responsibilities, networking, and the blurring of private-public roles, having important implications for political accountability and legitimacy. She further underscores that the horizontal structures imply a more adaptive and innovative process to contextual changes. However, research largely remains focused on bigger cities (e.g., Careja, 2019; Schmidtke, 2014).

*d) Debate IV: Migrants' impact on receiving society*

There is a growing strand of research that studies the revitalising potential of rural immigration to areas suffering from depopulation. CoR's report on the '*EU strategy for rural revival*' perceives rural revitalisation as the construction of sustainable communities vis-à-vis services, resources and, natural and cultural heritage with an urban development that is sensitive to the local demographic situation.

Within such regenerative efforts, migrants have been positioned as an answer to the declining population and weakening economy of rural towns as they live up local businesses (McAreyve & Argent, 2018) and maintain services like schools (Aure et al., 2018). While they do not displace the native workforce, they enhance the management of productive activities (Kasimis, 2010). Collantes et al. (2014) have specifically underscored the rejuvenating force of migrants in rural Spain.

Because the prospects for development are dependent on migration processes (Stockdale, 2006), it follows to emphasise the need to establish a synergy between receptivity



and revitalisation in research. However, there is no systematic study on the interconnection between the two. Only some studies focus on the pull factors behind the motivations for moving to rural settings (Maynard et al., 2009; Collantes et al., 2014), as most of them centre on dispersal policies and forced resettlement in rural settings (e.g., Glorius et al., 2021; Haselbacher & Segarra, 2021). Additionally, in the case of Spain, Collantes et al. (2014) reflect on the scarcity of studies that explore the impact of migrants in rural areas.

## **2.2. Potential contributions**

Having analysed the existing literature, this paper aims to overcome the gaps and contribute to the existing literature in the following manner.

First, as cities still receive the main bulk of the research focus, this paper will shine a light on the underdeveloped role of rural areas in migration studies. Likewise, while a significant number of recent studies have concentrated on the new role of rural areas in hosting post-2014 refugees, this study aims to establish an all-encompassing approach to immigrant receptivity. It will take the general definition of *migrant* advanced by the International Organisation of Migration which considers a migrant as a person who moves away from their place of usual residence. Therefore, the study will challenge the accepted conception of rural areas as NIDs while acknowledging that the experience of each setting is vital in determining reception efforts (Glorius et al., 2021). Connected to that is the objective of contributing to the critique of the homogeneity linked to the ‘rural idyll’. It will also strive to show the interdependence between receptivity and revitalisation. In doing that, the role of the host community will be paramount and further heightened by expanding the focus on local migration management to non-governmental actors, such as citizen-run initiatives. Overall, the aim of this paper is to uncover the essential synergy between receptivity and revitalisation which can only achieve successful results if both are considered two-way processes with the inclusion of migrant and native residents.

## **3. Methodology**

In order to answer the research question that explores the factors that influence the receptivity of migration to rural areas and its potential for revitalisation, a case study has been selected. It focuses on Aragón’s County of Jiloca, where a migrant integration pilot project takes place. The case study will be approached through the method of qualitative content analysis. For these purposes, ethnographic fieldwork was conducted in Monreal del Campo – where the project’s sessions are conducted – between April 19 and April 21, 2022. Forasmuch

as this methodology permits the analysis of the community's social lives and members (Levon, 2018), it is suitable to apprehend how the programme impacts Jiloca's inhabitants.

The decision to apply a case study responds to the wish of contributing to giving visibility to civil society-run initiatives in research beyond refugee management contexts and observing the ground dynamics that are rarely captured in political science. Additionally, no other initiative was selected as the study sought to gain in-depth detail from the programme, the participants and the setting dynamics. Thus, it should be considered a pilot and introductory approach, which would be further expanded in future more extensive research. While some of the representative power is confined to the restricted programme and region, the analysis of the integration project can potentially work as an introduction to locally-run initiatives. Ultimately and most importantly, it serves to empirically capture the main rural factors that influence these areas' receptivity and revitalising capacities in general.

### **3.1. Case-selection**

#### ***Contextual information: Rural areas in the EU, Spain and Teruel***

While rural areas comprise 80% of the total EU territory, they only host 30% of the population (EC, 2022). Hit by decades of out-migration and diminishing demographic systems, some rural areas in Europe feature the endemic phenomenon of depopulation (Bosque, 2018). Since that feature weakens the rural socio-economic and cultural reality, they are considered shrinking regions (ESPON, 2017).

Depopulation has been particularly intense in Southern Europe, where Spain has been most seriously affected (Collantes et al., 2014). This shrinking trend has shaped 'emptied Spain' whereby Teruel (Jiloca's province) has been dramatically affected (Llorent-Bedmar, Palma & Navarro-Granados, 2021).

#### ***Preliminary analysis of Jiloca's main characteristics***

Jiloca is one of Aragón's counties with the lowest development level as, according to Aragón's *Synthetic Index of the Territorial Development of Aragón*<sup>2</sup> (ISDT) (2021), it ranks 25th (out of 33) in development. That hinders the region's receptivity capacity. The region's migrant population (13.7%) is higher than the average in Aragón (12.2%) (see Table 1). These

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<sup>2</sup> The index has been developed in a bid to fairly distribute public funds in the development of the areas that have an ISDT level lower than 100 (Jiloca has a 99.426 index). The index considers the variables of economic activities, housing, mobility, facilities and services, and vital scenario and territorial heritage (Aragón's Government, 2021).

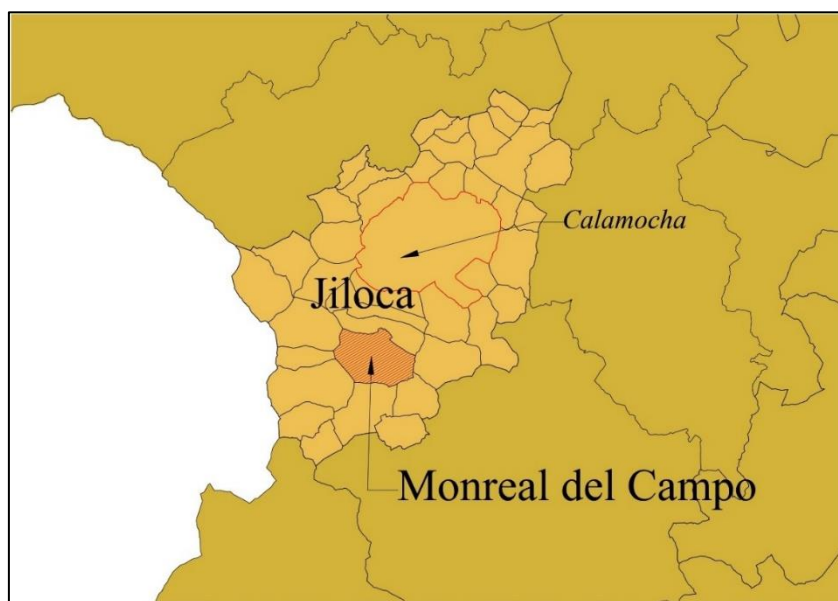
factors shape the area's unique revitalisation and receptivity capacity and thus make it an intriguing setting to scrutinise.

**Figure 1.** Map of Aragón



*Source:* Own elaboration

**Figure 2.** Detailed map of Jiloca



*Source:* Own elaboration

Jiloca is one of Teruel's counties (see *Figure 1*) and where Monreal del Campo is located (see *Figure 2*). Although its province is Calamocha (4,473 inhabitants), Monreal del Campo (2,522 inhabitants) is the second largest village. The closest province city to the region is Teruel, which is 58.3 km away from Monreal del Campo. Zaragoza, Aragón's capital city, is 115.4 km away from the same village.

As *Graph 1* shows, the region's population has decreased since 1940 – despite having a slight surge in 2011, exactly when the region hosted the highest number of migrant population (see *Graph 2*).

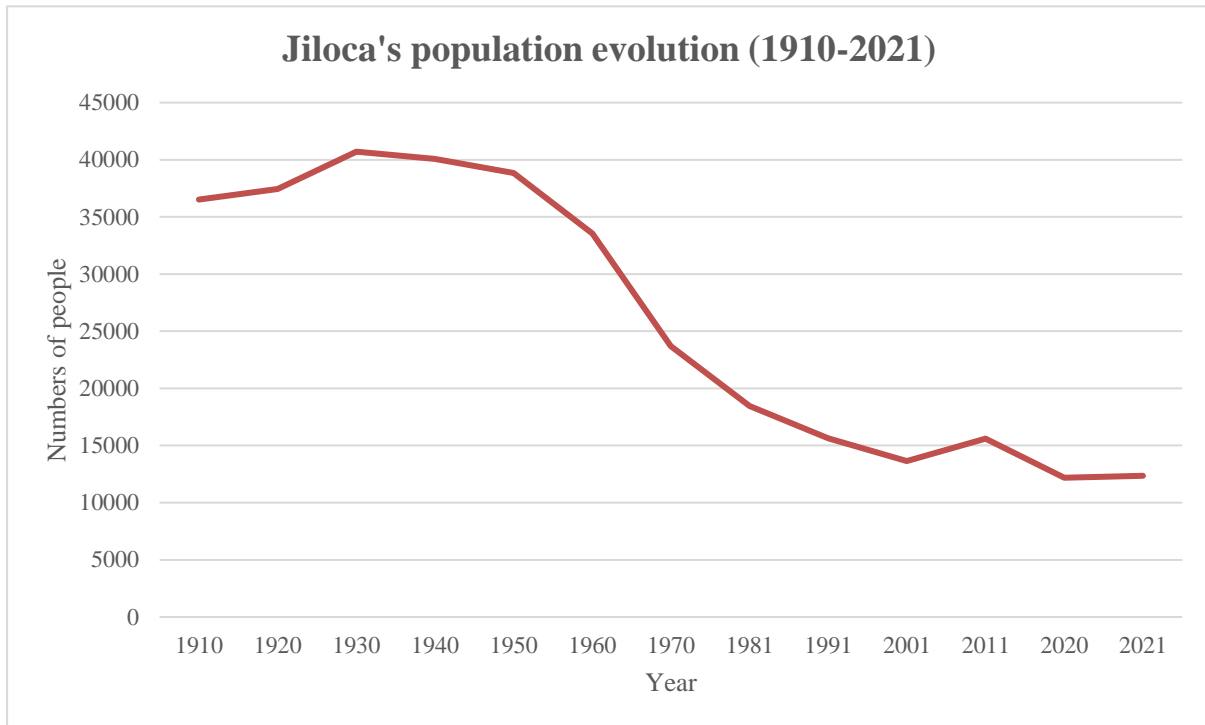
The natural movement of the population has remained negative since the 1990s and net migration was negative from 2010 to 2019 (IAEST, 2022). Moreover, Jiloca's birth rate is 6.25‰, which is lower than the average in Aragón (7.28‰) (IAEST, 2022), which is similar to the Spanish (7.19‰) (INE, 2022). The region's mortality rate is 15.12‰ – relatively higher than Aragón's (10.28‰) but considerably higher than the Spanish average (2.52‰) (IAEST, 2022). That connects with Jiloca's higher presence of the population who are older than 65, compared to Aragón's average (*Table 1*).

Nevertheless, the presence of migrants contributes to decreasing the average age in both the region and Monreal del Campo. The foreign population (see *Graph 2*) has remained rather stable in the last years increasing during and after the pandemic. While no reliable information on the immigration history of the area could be found, Jiloca's Social Workers referred to it before the 2000s when a big number of immigrants arrived in the county.

Lastly, Romanian, Moroccan and Polish foreign nationalities are the three most numerous foreign nationalities in Jiloca (IAEST, 2022). However, their presence is slightly different in Monreal del Campo, where Moroccans are followed by Romanians and Polish.

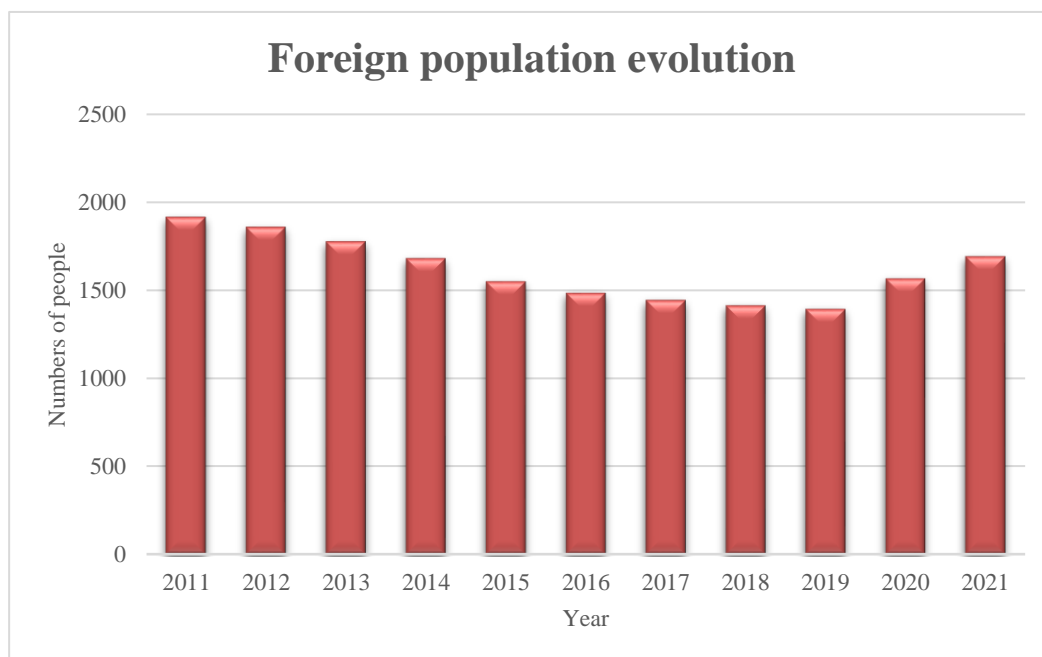
Economically, the most important sectors are, in order: industry, agriculture, services and construction (IAEST, 2022). The migrant population are most predominant in the industry sector (Monreal del Campo's Cultural Initiatives Officer, personal communication, April 20, 2022). The county's unemployment rate is approximately 6% (Aragón's Institute of Employment, personal communication, 2022) and in 2021, most of the unemployment was registered in the service sector (66.30%), followed by industry (12.15%) (IAEST, 2022).

**Graph 1.** Jiloca's population evolution (1910-2021)



*Source:* Adaptation from IAEST, 2022

**Graph 2.** Foreign population evolution in Jiloca (2011-2021)



*Source:* Adaptation from IAEST, 2022

**Table 1.** Comparative table on the main demographic indicators (2021)

Main demographic indicators	Monreal del Campo	Jiloca	Aragón
Population	2,487	12,183	1,321 million
Average age	43	48.4	45.1
% Foreign population	16.6%	13.7%	12.2%
% Population above 65 y/o	19.4%	27.4%	21.8%

Source: Adaptation from IAEST, 2022

### ***Integrating Beyond-Share SIRA' project***

Share SIRA is an EU-multilevel funded project, implemented from January 2021 to December 2022, that is locally applied in Jiloca by the PSICARA psychology association's "*Integrando Más Allá*" (Integrating Beyond).

Also present in other European rural areas, the project was developed to support the increasing role played by EU rural communities in the integration and resettlement of refugees and migrants since 2015 (Share Network, 2022) and to foster rural development and revitalisation (Westerby, Hueck & Soler, 2022).

As the ultimate actor in the implementation of Share SIRA's broad objectives at the local level, PSICARA's driving objective is adapted to the local setting capacities: "*To create spaces of encounter and integration in which the local people and extra-communitarian people can communicate and relate favourably*" as affirmed by the psychologists in charge. The project consists of the organisation of one-hour sessions delivered once a month and the provision of outreach and social counselling services.

### **3.2. Data collection**

*Data sources:*

Ethnographic fieldwork in Monreal del Campo (April 19-April 21, 2022):

- Participant observation of Jiloca (see *Annex 1* for detailed information on participant observation)
- Participant observation at PSICARA's April 20, 2022 session (see *Annex 1*).
- 1-hour group discussion with 8 PSICARA attendees (3 migrant and 5 native participants) (See *Figure 3*).
- 13 semi-structured interviews:
  - PSICARA's organisers
  - CEPAIM's Technician: Project development
  - Jiloca's Adult School Teacher
  - Local population (3: migrants and natives)
  - Social Workers (2)
  - Red Cross Agent
  - Accem's Technicians
  - Pysa's Human Resource Technician
  - ADRI's Technician
  - Monreal del Campo's Cultural Initiatives Officer
- Webinar session by Ferrer & Senar "*ExpresArte: Arte y salud mental en migración*"

Reports:

- ADRI Jiloca Gallocanta. (2020). *Situación del Mercado Inmobiliario en Municipios de Menos de 1000 habitantes*.
- Westerby, R., Hueck, P., & Soler, A. (2022). Building inclusive territories: Refugee and migrant integration for rural revitalisation.

Statistical databases: Jiloca's main characteristics.

- IAEST (Instituto Aragonés de Estadística)
- INE (Instituto Nacional de Estadística)

**Figure 3.** Group discussion distribution



*Source:* Jiloca's Adult School Teacher, 2022

#### **4. Findings**

This section examines the results of the case study. First, the factors of the area that hinder receptivity and prove the need for revitalisation will be examined. Following that, a summary of the area's opportunities for receptivity and migrants' potential for revitalisation will be addressed. The analysis will then focus on the 'Integrating Beyond-Share SIRA' project.

##### ***4.1. Characteristics of Jiloca***

The examination of the prefatory factors that condition Jiloca's receptivity (*aim 1*) will be structured into different themes divided into obstacles and opportunities for receptivity. For clarification, they are graphically exposed in Table 2, which is divided according to Glorius et al.'s (2021) receptivity dimensions – as it offers an organised structure.



**Table 2.** Summary on Jiloca’s characteristics

<b>Jiloca’s characteristics</b>	
<b>Structural framing conditions</b>	
<b>Obstacles</b>	<u>Housing</u> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Poor housing availability &amp; inhabitable houses.</li> <li>• High property prices &amp; few renting possibilities.</li> </ul>
	<u>Employment</u> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Lack of qualified employment possibilities.</li> <li>• Local employers’ limited knowledge of migrants’ human capital.</li> </ul>
	<u>Services</u> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• No hospitals.</li> <li>• Mobile social services.</li> <li>• Lack of local businesses.</li> </ul>
	<u>Connectivity</u> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Infrequent public transport and unassisted smaller villages.</li> <li>• Non-drivable roads to most remote villages.</li> </ul>
<b>Opportunities</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Closeness to nature.</li> <li>• Calmness.</li> <li>• Industrial importance &amp; general employment availability.</li> </ul>
<b>Political actors and structures</b>	
<b>Obstacles</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Decreasing political engagement.</li> <li>• Unsupported social services.</li> </ul>
<b>Opportunities</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Individualised treatment and eased coordination.</li> </ul>
<b>Society and societal structures</b>	
<b>Obstacles</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• High social control.</li> <li>• Othering, stigmatisation and racism.</li> <li>• Little native implication in reception.</li> </ul>
<b>Opportunities</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Social proximity.</li> <li>• Strong sense of community.</li> </ul>

*Source:* Own elaboration

### a) *Obstacles of Jiloca*

Jiloca's challenges are those factors which hinder the county's migrant receptivity capacity and disadvantage its entire community – natives included, and hence, need revitalisation.

#### Housing

Jiloca's housing problem was the most repeated obstacle in the interviews. A perception that was confirmed through observation of the most peripheral sections of the area: run-down and abandoned-looking houses (see *Figure 4*). Housing has been the focus of a study developed by ADRI (Asociación para el Desarrollo Rural Integral de las Tierras del Jiloca y Gallocanta) in 2020, whose technician was interviewed.

**Figure 4.** Example street in Monreal del Campo



Source: own photograph

The study found that the problem was most prominent among villages with fewer than 1,000 inhabitants, which comprise 95% of the region (IAEST, 2021). Here, sales are rare and with high price rates, and there is scarce rental availability (ADRI, 2020).

Additionally, 13.68% of the houses in the region are empty and more than 40% of the buildings were built before 1950 (IAEST, 2021) and have rarely been renovated, a situation which is further aggravated by the extreme weather conditions in winter (ADRI's Technician, personal communication, April 21, 2022).

The interviewees exposed that the housing problem is widespread in bigger villages too, such as Monreal del Campo. Indeed, one of PSICARA's migrant participants expressed that "there are no renting possibilities" (personal communication, May 5, 2022). In another interview, ADRI's Technician claimed that access to the housing market "is a lot about social networks", that "homeowners are very racist" and that "*Moroccans no* is (a) very common (phrase) among house owners". Consequently, upon arrival "the most common is to settle wherever (migrants) can, even sharing accommodation with other families" (personal communication, April 21, 2022).

### Employment & training

In establishing a link with the former theme, a Red Cross Officer working in the county affirmed that the area "needs people who are willing to work but there is a lack of people and a lack of housing opportunities" (personal communication, April 2022), thus meaning that there is no general scarcity of employment in the area despite native's concern about the lack of high-skilled employment and higher education for the youth.

The main obstacle to migrant labour integration highlighted by the Accem's (Asociación Comisión Católica Española de Migración) Officers is the lack of knowledge of who the employers and the potential employees are – especially for women. Employment seemed a crucial factor for remaining in the area for both internal and international migrants. The lack of higher education and certificate-based training opportunities was also underlined in my interviews.

The hectic activity of Monreal's industrial estate reflects the importance of the industrial sector in the area. Indeed, the automotive metallic pieces factory of Pysa (see *Figure 5*), at the heart of Monreal del Campo's industrial area is the most popular company among migrant men, (Pysa's Human Resources Technician, personal communication, April 26, 2022). However, Monreal del Campo's Cultural Initiative Centre Officer explained that the occupations for women vary according to origin (April 20, 2022).

**Figure 5.** Pyrsa company



*Source: own photograph*

### Connectivity

In their interview, the County's Social Workers expressed that, while Monreal del Campo and Calamocha have access to regional and longer-scale train and bus services, some of the smaller villages do not have access and the inhabitants require a vehicle. Nevertheless, several respondents shared their discontentment with the infrequency of public transport. The inter-regional road connectivity is also limited, as shown by the vindictive sign in Figure 6.

### Services

Jiloca's provision of basic social services is mobile and is only available to the local population in allocated days (Social Workers, personal communication, April 21, 2022). Access to health care is poor as there are only 3 medical centres in the region and 55 doctor's offices (IAEST, 2021).

Additionally, concerning the role of political actors, the Social Workers admitted that they felt abandoned by the administration. In my spontaneous interview with Monreal del Campo's Cultural Initiative Centre Officer, she expressed her regret for the disappearance of some local socio-cultural activities that fostered cultural exchange.

Regarding the commerce available, in the group discussion, one of PSICARA's migrant participants referred to the bigger cities of Teruel and Zaragoza for a wider shopping variety (personal communication, April 20, 2022). Furthermore, the Cultural Initiative Centre Officer

verified that most businesses had disappeared as she clarified that most shops did not exist anymore when handing me an (outdated) map of the area.

### Social segregation

While from observation, I did not sense housing segregation in Monreal del Campo, I perceived social segregation in my attendance to PSICARA's session and by walking around Monreal del Campo forasmuch as cultural groups were visually divided and there was no mixing. Indeed, one of the project's native participants expressed that "they (migrants) do their thing, and we (natives) do ours".

In the interviews, I also perceived a high degree of social control, which was most prevalent among the elder native population. The unwritten social norm of greeting in public spaces triggered tension in the group discussion and migrant participants were aware that action was expected from them. Nevertheless, racism, Othering and the stigmatisation of the migrant population, especially the Moroccans, were also prevalent in the group discussion, where the hierarchisation of migrants based on origin was also present. Finally, the native population showed little engagement in the community.

### *b) Opportunities of Jiloca*

Notwithstanding the barriers, Table 2 also uncovers Jiloca's factors that benefit it compared to urban cities vis-à-vis receptivity.

Respondents especially stressed the area's structural calmness and closeness to nature. Despite their scarcity, political structures and services were described to be very harmonised: "there is a lot of coordination between entities [...] it is a more personal treatment, and the interventions are quite detailed and close" (Red Cross Officer, personal communication, April 21, 2022).

My own experience with the fieldwork underscored the eased inter-entity coordination with the many spontaneous interviews that occurred after being connected by previous interviewees. Indeed, that connects to the area's societal proximity and closeness. The good one-to-one relationship and sense of belonging among neighbours were also underscored by respondents. The good individual rapport contrasts with the worse group experience – highlighted by the obstacles.

## 4.2. Potential for revitalisation

Migrants' presence in Jiloca is a source for its regeneration. This section, as seen in Table 2, analyses the preliminary findings on the factors that favour and hamper their revitalising capacity (*aim 2*).

**Table 3.** Migrants' potential for Jiloca's revitalisation

<b>Migrants' potential for Jiloca's revitalisation</b>	
<b>Opportunities</b>	<b>Obstacles</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Rejuvenating factor.</li> <li>• Demand for available services.</li> <li>• Perceived as the key to the sustainable future of the region.</li> <li>• Filling the industry's labour demand needs.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Lacking language skills.</li> <li>• Prevalent irregular status.</li> <li>• Feeling uninformed/uninvited to main events.</li> <li>• Scared to come across as undeserving.</li> </ul>

*Source:* Own elaboration

First, foreign students comprise above 23% of the total students enrolled in Jiloca's schools and this percentage continues to rise yearly (IAEST, 2021). The host community acknowledge migrants' rejuvenating capacity: "without them, the schools in the smallest villages would disappear" as Jiloca's Adult School Teacher recognised (personal communication, April 26, 2022). In fact, when reflecting on the region's future, the Social Workers underscored that if migrants are still present, the county may prosper. As several of the respondents observed, their presence implies the demand for the region's services (commerce, social and health services, leisure activities...). Likewise, Pyrsa's Human Resources Technician claimed that migrant human capital in the region has historically covered roles that would otherwise be empty because of natives' rejection to undertake certain tasks. These factors point to a historically heighten diversity of the region.

Nevertheless, there are some factors that can conceivably work as an obstacle, together with the challenges of Jiloca. Language may hinder migrants' revitalising capacity, as one of PSICARA's migrant participants said "I have lived here for so many years but the language is

still an obstacle [...] to communicate with people” (personal communication, May 2022), an experience which was also shared by other foreign participants. This reflects that the lack of orientation is not only restricted to recent comers as highlighted by migrants’ general disinformation on ongoing local events and points at migrants’ weak social networks.

Likewise, the Red Cross Agent warned that the irregular status among migrants in the area is ever-increasing. Furthermore, in the group discussion, the migrant participants showed fear and timidity in conveying their necessities to the administration and participating in local festivities with the fear of appearing undeserving “we do not want to disturb” (PSICARA’s migrant participant, personal communication, 2022). This last quote points at what the above-described factors can potentially epitomise, migrants’ reluctance to become active participants in shaping a more prosperous community. An example of the former is the little migrant entrepreneurship in the area, as stated by ADRI’s Agent, and the poor participation of migrants in regional festivities.

Altogether, the endemic challenges of Jiloca expressed in Chapter 4.1.a, which equally affect both native and migrant populations, could be more detrimental to the migrant community because of their lacking language skills and social networks.

#### **4.2. Analysis of PSICARA’S “Integrating Beyond” project’s pilot actions**

This section critically explores the actions of the pilot project ‘Integrating Beyond-Share SIRA’ in fostering revitalisation and integration. Before delving into analysis, the results are preliminary as the project was ongoing at the time of the research.

Regarding the broader project’s objectives and formalities, Share SIRA’s focus on the heightened role of EU rural areas in reception efforts since 2015 follows the mistaken political and academic fashion of considering these settings new in migration history.

Integrating *Beyond* seeks to reach the maximum number of members in the community (PSICARA’s psychologists, personal communication, May 25, 2022). Nonetheless, through fieldwork, the reality proved limited, as the workshops’ attendees are students of Jiloca’s Adult School, which is the institution the psychologists partnered with to access the community. The narrow profile is comprised of mostly women, where natives are retirees and migrants are Moroccan (whose age range is wider). Additionally, most of the attendees are from Monreal del Campo, where only a minority of native women are from neighbouring villages. Although scheduled sessions are also shared on social media, participation is not expanded. Overall, the

scope of the project brings into question its representativity since other present nationalities in the territory are not addressed and the age range is rather reduced.

On the one hand, the project approaches integration and revitalisation from an intercultural and contact hypothesis perspective, whereby the workshops “(enable) the creation of spaces (of dialogue)” (PSICARA’s psychologists, personal communication, May 25, 2022), thus they seek to counter social segregation. Nevertheless, as the psychologists admitted, in some sessions such a space for interaction was not favoured. Indeed, as Figure 7 shows, I could sense that the emotional management session did not break with the social segregation as participants were spatially divided and there was a high degree of power relations and asymmetrical participation (migrant participants in the back and native participants at the front). More generally, such division was underlined when, in their interview, the psychologists reduced their sessions to the creation of “a space for communication that eventually leads to greeting each other” “which in the end is achieving integration”, thus reproducing the native’s importance of abiding by the unwritten social norm of greeting.

**Figure 7.** PSICARA’s session on emotional management



*Source:* Jiloca’s Adult School Teacher, 2022



**Figure 8.** Intercultural workshop promotional poster



Source: PSICARA, 2022

Furthermore, some content of their programme, such as the intercultural workshop – where different traditions, such as food or funeral rituals are shared – while intended to erase differences across cultures (PSICARA’s Psychologists, personal communication, May 2022), may instead foster deeper differentiation between the two groups – as seen by the cultural stereotyping of its promotional poster (see *Figure 8*).

On the other hand, the other advanced challenges of the area in Section 4.1.a. are not directly addressed. Lastly, while the effects of integration and revitalisation are hard to measure at such an early stage of the project, PSICARA’s Psychologists offered a tentative approach. Overall, ‘Integrating Beyond’ can be understood as a new quality service that is brought to the community. Additionally, as a young externally-funded association, they believed that they offered new ideas that did not mean a financial burden on the local authorities and overcame the latter’s limited innovative tools. While they admitted that a project that happens once a month and for such a limited timeframe “will not change the behaviour of some people, leave alone certain beliefs”, it may foster a “prior reflection, a small change of conduct, such as greeting your neighbours” (personal communication, May, 2022). However, one of PSICARA’s migrant participant’s perspective shows that the psychologists’ expectations may be unrealistic as she stated: “I cannot get to know these women by just seeing them once a

month” (personal communication, May, 2022). Notwithstanding, as native residents, the psychologists were benefitting from the project since they are becoming more aware and observant of cultural diversity.

## **5. Discussion**

### ***5.1. Discussion of results***

This section structures the main prefatory findings within the literature. In general, the case study has captured rural areas’ importance for migrant receptivity and the need for revitalisation – brought forward by the literature review.

First, Jiloca’s depopulation is mainly explained by its negative natural increase which is matched by a rather low net migration if CEDDAR’s depopulation definition is applied. Furthermore, Jiloca’s migrant population representation – also historically important as preliminarily found – contributes to the area’s diversity and to the literature challenging the rural idyll (Holloway, 2007).

Focusing on *aim 1* and Glorius et al.’s first receptivity frame, Jiloca’s industrial preponderance positively influences receptivity and might cause what Collantes et al. (2014) argue is a favourable immigration experience to the region. Indeed, contrarily to Caponio, et al.’s (2022) research findings, Jiloca does not have a scarcity of employment opportunities and that demonstrates the important position of rural areas for global flows brought forward by Woods (2007) and, McAreyve and Argent (2018) against the literature that solely focuses on rural stagnant nature. However, the study found that high-skilled jobs are scarce. Moreover, something that the findings highlighted and has not been advanced by existing research is the structural factors of calmness and closeness to nature which revalorise Jiloca’s receptivity capacity.

Nonetheless, its limited structural resources, specifically the lack of well-conditioned and rental housing availability appears to be an obstacle that transcends borders, as highlighted by other authors (Maynard et al., 2009; Collantes et al., 2014). ADRI’s Technician proved what Weidinger and Kordel (2020) advanced in their work: access to the limited housing market in rural areas depends on social resources. That is hindered by migrants’ limited social networks (McAreyve & Argent, 2018), which was further heightened in the group discussion as participants expresses disinformation and general social disorientation. Moreover, the region’s restricted social services availability and the lack of higher education also match what the

literature has underscored about social services shortages in rural areas (Caponio et al., 2022).

Additionally, concerning societal factors (Glorius et al.'s third frame), the study found high degrees of social proximity within the area, which eased neighbouring and direct contact, as argued by Glorius et al. (2020). Nevertheless, proximity did not seem to automatically lead to strengthened weak ties as Barberis and Pavolini (2015) advance. Contrarily, migrants' limited social networks (McArey & Argent, 2018) contribute to their weak social bargaining and that is used by natives to establish unwritten social norms through the reproduction of nativist discourses of belonging (Barberis & Pavolini, 2015; Glorius et al., 2021), such as making greeting a forced criterium for fitting in.

Regarding the factors that influence revitalisation (*aim 2*), the results have further supported the rejuvenating migrant potential (Aure et al., 2019; McArey & Argent, 2018) in lowering the region's average age and contributing to keeping schools open. Kasimis' (2010) findings on migrants' role in the maintenance of businesses were also seen as they take roles that natives would not accept, thus not displacing the native workforce (Kasimis, 2010). However, the aforementioned poor social resources, which may connect to wider socioeconomic inequalities and racism, make them especially vulnerable to the areas' challenges and hence decreases their revitalising potential.

Integrating Beyond-Share SIRA's project can be found within a reality of decreased political engagement (Glorius et al.'s second frame) in giving support to rural areas' migration management (Careja, 2019). The project's representation mirrors what Careja advances, the proximity and dynamism of the third sector. Their approach to the community's necessities was also found to be more innovative and adaptative, as Careja further advances.

The programme focuses on Jiloca's societal factors influencing revitalisation and receptivity basing its actions on the contact hypothesis, advanced by Allport (1954), from an intercultural perspective. However, the separation between cultures was still visible in the sessions. While no firm conclusions can be reached from the limited fieldwork, literature has warned of the flaws that such a type of project implies, as they are usually ineffective in fostering more sustained contact (Matejskova & Leitner, 2011) and they do not offset segregation (McArey & Argent, 2018), which connects to one of PSICARA's foreign participant's critical comment that exposed that she could not get to know the native population with monthly sessions. Additionally, the close and seemingly exceptional good relationship with their neighbours, as expressed by several of PSICARA's participants in the group

discussion, reflects what Matejskova and Leitner (2011) claim, that the acceptance of migrants is rather an individualised process.

Likewise, Lundsteen's (2022) note on the prevailing power asymmetries in activities that foster contact could be seen in the session' structure as there were different social positions and unequal power relations whereby the psychologists acquired a dominant role, followed closely by the native participants. Based on their graphical representation (see *Figure 8*), topics tackling culture and traditions can bring counterproductive effects. Indeed, Parzer, Astleithner and Rieder's (2016) research finds these activities reproduce imaginations of exoticism, foreignness and otherness. Moreover, they do not make any reference to the region's migration history, which can be beneficial for receptivity (Glorius et al., 2021).

Altogether, while the above discussion tried to establish links between this study's findings and the analysed literature, it should be remarked that Jiloca's distinct characteristics – specifically the availability of employment and industrial importance, which favour the area's economic position – might be due to its favourable conditions which are not necessarily shared by other more remote rural areas. Thus, given the lack of comparative analysis, the conclusions remain preliminary.

Overall, this analysis contributes to proving the necessity to view receptivity and revitalisation altogether. If receptivity is not achieved, revitalisation cannot happen. Simultaneously, revitalisation improves receptivity conditions. They are both interdependent.

## ***5.2. Recommendations for migration studies***

The case study has uncovered the limits of the literature in bringing to the fore the important role of rural areas in migration. Thus, it follows to give some recommendations for migration studies.

The prevailing methodological and disciplinary boundaries in literature need to be reconstructed (Caponio et al., 2022), i.e., methodological nationalism's constricted focus on nation-states and the disregard of migration trends fluctuations and outcomes amid different contexts (Wimmer & Schiller, 2002). The latter contributes to the recent literature that shapes rural areas as NIDs – however, the only novelty is the research interest in these settings. Indeed, by focusing on post-2014 migration (e.g., Caponio & Pettrachin, 2021) or extra-communitarian migrants – as is the case in 'Integrating Beyond-Share SIRA' – the field mistakenly perceives these populations as generators of new demands based on their cultural

difference. However, their needs can be expanded to pre-2014 migrants and vulnerable populations at large as the necessities involve structural socioeconomic inequalities and racism (Lundsteen, 2022). This research strand reflects migration studies' tendency to individualise the integration process (migrants bringing new needs). That is why the term receptivity is deemed necessary to apply, for it also involves the host community. To normalise and strengthen the long-established role of rural areas, migration studies should bring to light their histories of migration through longitudinal and comparative research. Overall, while rural areas might benefit from this sudden interest, their shrinking nature requires a more sustained focus. Therefore, research should expand their approach beyond their shrinking nature to highlight their high degree of proactivity.

## 6. Conclusions

Stemming from rural areas' shrinking nature and the recent political interest in bringing migration to these spaces, this paper provided an entry point to normatively address the factors that affect the receptivity of migration to rural areas and its potential for revitalisation from a dual perspective (native and migrant populations). The work provided an extensive literature review, necessary in structuring the different arising debates on the recently developed literature on immigration to rural areas and its limits. Then, the case study responded to the need to overcome the listed limitations.

First, the work explored the process of receptivity (*aim 1*). While it discovered obstacles, mainly structural, that hinder rural areas' capacity to host migrant populations and to support the entire community – natives included – and that need revitalisation, its favourable factors such as community dynamism, strong coordination and social proximity revealed the importance of the native community for migrant reception. In turn, social proximity was found to hamper migrant integration concerning strong social control and unwritten norms.

Second, it addressed migrants' potential for revitalisation (*aim 2*). The paper unveiled migrants' capacity in rejuvenating the territory not only demographically but also socio-economically through their human capital and demand for services. Altogether, they were found to be key to the sustainable future of rural areas. Nevertheless, migrants' regenerating driving force is hampered by barriers such as their language difficulties, their increasing irregular status among them and their disinformation and disorientation of the areas' resources. However, these are not the only barriers to releasing their revival potential as these uncover migrants' limited social resources and networks, which intensify their vulnerabilities to the

receptivity structural obstacles of rural areas – addressed by *aim 1*. With this, the necessity to establish the synergy between receptivity and revitalisation was highlighted to challenge the political pressures that forcedly foster migrants' revitalisation. Indeed, if revitalisation is the desired target, addressing receptivity is a pre-requirement.

The application of the pilot study on Jiloca and Integrating Beyond-Share SIRA's actions sought to counter the scarcity of studies that explore the impact of migrants in rural Spain, as diagnosed by Collantes et al. (2014). It fulfilled several objectives. First, the location focus on Jiloca epitomised the shrinking and depopulation trend of European rural areas. Second, the programme focus exemplified the paramount role of the rural native community and civil society (1) and attempted to establish the synergy between revitalisation and receptivity. The programme addresses rural receptivity and revitalisation from an intercultural perspective. Nevertheless, the preliminary analysis found that such a culturalist approach was limited in addressing the prevailing socioeconomic inequalities and racism within power relations. If the latter is to be directed, factors that need to be acted upon are the knowledge gap in employment and housing unavailability, as exposed by the subjects interviewed. Therefore, possible productive and normative initiatives to address the structural inequalities in the territory are the organisation of regional job fairs with the figure of a mediator and the provision of public housing or the Catalan practice of *masoveria* – maintenance and reconstruction of abandoned houses and the increased accommodation of the population (Ibáñez, 2018).

On balance, the paper uncovered rural areas' paramount role in global dynamics as they host flows of people and capital – through their productive potential. Furthermore, it proved rural areas' diverse populations and established migration history, which challenges the wrong perception of rural cultural homogeneity. Thus, the paper challenged the methodological nationalism prevalent in migration studies that treats rural areas as NIDs. Additionally, by taking the general umbrella of migrants, the paper overcame the strict focus on refugees when rural settings are analysed. Finally, using receptivity as a driving concept allowed for a dual perspective on revitalisation as it overcame the limits of existing research that put the focus on migrants in the process of integration.

Regarding the methodology, despite the restricted study applicability due to the narrow focus, the lack of the comparative aspect and the short ethnographic research, it unveiled the multi-transformational nature of ethnographic research (Campbell & Lassiter, 2015). Overall, the study served as an approximation to the inherent features that influence rural areas' receptivity and revitalising capacity. In view of the limits, this pilot study would lead to a more

extensive analysis with more intense fieldwork and a comparative lens to reach preliminary conclusions on the potential for receptivity and revitalisation of rural areas. In such research, the themes that arose during the pilot fieldwork could be further explored. That involves acquiring the historical lens and expanding the analysis to other migratory profiles for future research to become more representative of rural areas' migration.

Overall, the study found that, while rural areas offer distinctive factors that promote receptivity, their structural obstacles hinder the pivotal establishment of the synergy between receptivity and revitalisation. Therefore, not until the groundings are addressed, will the sustainable future of rural areas be released.

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### **Annex I: Information on participant observation**

As a participant observer, I, as the researcher, became a member of the social situation. First, my participant observation of the village implied recording voice notes of my interpretations of the spatial distribution of the town and social interactions. However, these were recorded when there was no citizen around to avoid intrusion. Photos and videos of the village's buildings were also captured. It was also throughout my observation of the village that I found new people that accepted to be interviewed. Nevertheless, this was done in strategic city council facilities, such as the Cultural Initiative Centre and the Initiatives Centre. I introduced myself and my research purposes to relevant actors. I also entered into different businesses to cover my personal necessities but I observed and afterwards took note of any relevant social interaction that I had witnessed. In this case, I behaved as any other customer and did not specify any information to any actor on the study's purposes.

Second, regarding my participant observation of PSICARA's session, prior to the start of the activities, I arrived at the facilities time in advance in order to introduce myself to the programme's organisers and the Adult School's Teacher. Although we had been in touch via email and phone before my arrival, my introduction was a moment to confirm my presence and identity and reaffirm my purposes for the stay. As the time was approaching, participants started to arrive. I tried to introduce myself and my study to some of them in order for them to know me and we held some conversations about their experiences in Jiloca throughout time. While some members arrived earlier, most were late to the session and I was not introduced to the entire group until the end of the session. Because I was keeping track of my observations by taking field notes in a personal notebook, I purposely sat at the back of the room where the activity was being held to avoid intruding on the members' participation. I did not participate during the lecture but I participated once, at the end of the session when feedback and debate were welcome. After that, I introduced myself and the project's purposes to the entire group and I welcomed the participants to stay for the group discussion by clarifying the objectives of this and the rules of equal and respectful participation.