

# Strategic Governance Plan for Rural Depopulation in RESOE

## *COMMON ACTION PLAN*



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# 1 Introduction

The macro-region "Regions of Southwest Europe" (RESOE) was constituted by a Memorandum of Understanding in 2010 signed by Castilla y León, Galicia and Northern Portugal. In 2014 it was extended with the accession of the Principality of Asturias and the Central Region of Portugal. Finally, in 2017 the region of Cantabria joined. This action plan uses the term "RESOE" to refer to the Spanish regions of the macro-region: Asturias, Cantabria, Castilla y León, and Galicia.

RESOE has a total population of 6.7 million inhabitants, with Galicia hosting the largest share (2.7 million inhabitants). All four RESOE regions have a high degree of rurality, and are facing challenges with demographic change. The Government of Spain uses this concept of "demographic challenge" (*reto demográfico*) as a way to group a series of mega-trends that affect the country, including: depopulation of an extensive parts of its territory (mainly its rural areas); low density levels outside cities; a sustained fall in birth rates; progressive ageing; and the effects derived from seasonal overpopulation (Ministerio para la Transición Ecológica y el Reto Demográfico, 2019).

Moreover, as in the rest of Spain, RESOE regions have experienced reductions in public budgets. These reductions, combined with mounting demographic pressures of population decline and ageing have brought strong fiscal pressures to regional and local governments to provide public services effectively and sustainably. This has occurred in tandem with increasing costs of service provision in key areas of social services, such as health and education. In this context, the structural changes brought by the COVID-19 pandemic to work habits and the European Recovery Funds represent a unique opportunity for policy-makers to invest in the well-being of rural communities.

The project *Strategic Governance Plan for Rural Depopulation in RESOE* aims at designing an action plan for each region and a common strategy for the four regions on three relevant topics to OECD rural regions facing depopulation: 1) multi-level governance, 2) entrepreneurship, innovation and digitalisation, and 3) quality service provision. This project is part of the OECD work-stream *Preparing Regions for Demographic Change*.

The present document outlines the common strategy for the four regions based on an assessment of current policies in broad areas: entrepreneurship, innovation digitalisation (Chapter 2); and multi-level governance (Chapter 3). Table 1.1 summarises a proposed set of recommendations and actions. These can be:

- joint actions at the level of the RESOE macro-region in which regions could collaborate further;
- individual/parallel actions (generally addressed to the national government but aiming at increasing cooperation between the Autonomous Communities);
- and inter-regional actions with the Central and Northern regions of Portugal.

The table includes the recommended timing for the implementation of each action and the level of government or organisations responsible for taking action.

The common plan accompanies four regional action plans that summarise a series of recommendations and actions for each of the four RESOE regions.

Table 1.1. Recommendations and actions proposed by this action plan

JOINT ACTIONS			
Recommendation	Action	Timing	Who
<b>Increase cooperation for the implementation of broadband connectivity and the digitalisation of public services in rural areas (Chapter 2. Recommendation 3)</b>	Focus on improving broadband connectivity in areas with largest gaps (Chapter 2. Action 3.1)	Short-term / Medium-term	National Government; Regional Governments; Rural municipalities; Non-profit cooperatives; Mutual organisations
	Leverage cases of best practices on smart public services across the macro-region (Chapter 2. Action 3.2)	Short-term / Medium-term	National Government; Regional Governments (especially Castilla y León)
<b>Deepen macro-regional horizontal collaboration (Chapter 3. Recommendation 2)</b>	Map informal instances of collaboration between RESOE regions to seek formalisation (Chapter 3. Action 2.1)	Short-term	Regional Governments
	Design and implement (or formalise) collaboration agreements between RESOE regions to foster coordinated action and service delivery (Chapter 3. Action 2.2)	Medium-term	Regional Governments
	Implement a pilot Task Force for the Demographic Challenge (Chapter 3. Action 2.3)	Medium-term	Regional Governments
INDIVIDUAL/PARALLEL ACTIONS			
Recommendation	Action	Timing	Who
<b>Foster a rural approach to the entrepreneurial ecosystem and enhance rural enterprises opportunities (Chapter 2. Recommendation 1)</b>	Promote a rural approach and macro-regional initiatives in the framework of the "Recovery, Transformation and Resilience" Plan (Chapter 2. Action 1.1)	Medium-term	National Government (Ministry of Economic Affairs and Digital Transformation)
	Facilitate firm mobility and geographical expansion within the RESOE macro-region (Chapter 2. Action 1.2)	Short-term / Medium-term	Regional Governments
<b>Develop a joint vision on smart specialisation and innovation for the macro-region (Chapter 2. Recommendation 2)</b>	Develop an integrated vision and cooperation on smart specialisation and innovation (Chapter 2. Action 2.1)	Short-term	Regional Governments, Private sector
	Encourage cooperation between RESOE universities to link regional innovation and smart specialisation strategies to regional job opportunities (Chapter 2. Action 2.2)	Short-term / Medium-term	Regional Governments, Universities, Business agencies, Private sector
<b>The National Government can assume an active role in promoting and better coordinating mechanisms of vertical collaboration (Chapter 3. Recommendation 1)</b>	Strengthen Bilateral Cooperation Commissions and the use of collaboration agreements (Chapter 3. Action 1.1)	Long-term	National Government; Regional Governments
	Review the structure and governance of the "Sectorial Conference for the Demographic Challenge" (Chapter 3. Action 1.2)	Short-term	National Government (Ministry of Ecological Transition and Demographic Challenge; Sectorial Conference for the Demographic Challenge); Regional Governments
INTER-REGIONAL ACTIONS WITH PORTUGAL			

Recommendation	Action	Timing	Who
<b>Territorialise and diversify areas of collaboration with Central and North Portugal (Chapter 3. Recommendation 3)</b>	Develop an action plan for the territorialisation of the Spain-Portugal Common Cross-Border Development Strategy (Chapter 3. Action 3.1)	Short-term / Medium-term	National Government; POCTEP; Regional Governments; Municipalities
	Diversify areas of collaboration with the Central and North regions of Portugal (Chapter 3. Action 3.2)	Short-term / Medium-term	Regional Governments (especially Galicia and Castilla y León)

# 2 Entrepreneurship, innovation and digitalisation

## Introduction

Besides access to public services, rural areas face challenges in job creation and boosting entrepreneurship, innovation and broadband connectivity (OECD, 2020). These challenges are key to retaining population, especially the young, and attracting new population. This chapter offers common guidelines to promote entrepreneurship, innovation and digitalisation in the RESOE macro-region. Through a series of recommendations, it suggests: entrepreneurship as a strategy to contain depopulation; a better connection between smart specialisation strategies, rural innovation and regional needs; and improving the provision of broadband connectivity in rural areas. This chapter makes use of the degree of urbanisation typology that allows classifying human settlements into cities, towns and suburbs and rural areas in an internationally comparable way.<sup>1</sup>

The common plan is framed in a context of entrepreneurial activity's slowdown, high youth unemployment rates, decline in manufacturing jobs and low innovation levels in RESOE regions. Regarding entrepreneurship, the number of active firms in the RESOE macro-region fell by 5.1% in 2008-2017, more strongly than Spain (-3.5%) (OECD, OECD Regional Business Demography, 2018). However, in 2019, the youth unemployment rate was close to 28%, below the rate in Spain (33%) (OECD, 2020), after reaching historic highs at the peak of the 2008 financial crisis in 2013. At the same time, manufacturing jobs decreased around 25% in the decade following the 2008 financial crisis, from 437 300 to 328 700 (OECD, OECD Regional Business Demography, 2018), while similarly to Spain, high-value-added services<sup>2</sup> increased their employment share by 1.4 percentage points. Finally, investment in innovation remains low, as the share of R&D in total expenditure in RESOE reached only 0.98% of GDP in 2018 (0.26 points below Spain's and near one point below the OECD average<sup>3</sup>) (OECD, 2020) and patent applications per million inhabitants in 2015 (23.6) were below Spain's average (38.6).

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<sup>1</sup> "Cities" are densely populated areas with at least 50% of the population living in urban centres, "towns and semi-dense areas" are intermediate density areas with less than 50% of the population living in rural grid cells and less than 50% of the population living in urban centres, and "rural areas" are thinly populated areas with more than 50% of the population living in rural grid cells. The Degree of Urbanisation was endorsed by the UN Statistical Commission in March 2020. See European Commission/ILO/FAO/OECD/UN-Habitat/World Bank (2020), "A recommendation on the method to delineate cities, urban and rural areas for international statistical comparisons", Statistical Commission background document, 51th session, 3-6 March 2020. Items for discussion and decision: demographic statistics. Available at <https://unstats.un.org/unsd/statcom/51st-session/documents/BG-Item3j-Recommendation-E.pdf>

<sup>2</sup> Information and communication, financial and insurance activities, and professional, scientific, technical, administrative, support service activities

<sup>3</sup> Average of 30 OECD countries (data from Canada and Switzerland is from 2017).

The advancement of entrepreneurship and innovation in RESOE regions will happen in an economic context weakened by the COVID-19 pandemic. In Asturias and Galicia, GDP fell in 2020 by 11% and 8.9% respectively (BBVA Research, 2021). The COVID-19 crisis further deteriorated youth labour participation levels: in the second half of 2020, people aged 16-29 in Asturias, Cantabria and Galicia had the lowest activity rate across Spanish TL2 regions (between 43% and 44%), almost ten points below the national average (Consejo de la Juventud de España, 2021). The average unemployment rate across the four regions, at 12.1% on average in the fourth quarter of 2020 (INE, 2021), is expected to fall slightly by 2022.

This chapter outlines the current situation and main challenges faced by the RESOE macro-region in terms of entrepreneurship, innovation and digitalisation. Despite the difficulties encountered by rural regions in these areas, RESOE regions, with the support of the national government, could establish reinforced cooperation and implement strategies at the macro-regional level. This chapter offers three recommendations on these issues. First, it presents the main challenges and difficulties faced by entrepreneurs in rural areas, describes RESOE regions efforts to encourage rural entrepreneurship, and recommends to promote a stronger territorial focus to national entrepreneurship initiatives as well as greater market unity to facilitate the establishment of companies in other territories. Second, it describes the opportunities arising from regional smart specialisation and innovation strategies and suggests developing a macro-regional common vision on smart specialisation to boost youth employment and innovation in RESOE regions. Finally, the chapter discusses the status of broadband connectivity and recent efforts to improve it at national and regional level, and proposes further digitalisation of public services as well as completing the deployment of broadband connectivity throughout the RESOE macro-region.

### **Recommendation 1: Foster a rural approach to the entrepreneurial ecosystem and enhance rural enterprises opportunities**

Rural entrepreneurship in RESOE regions currently occurs in a context of a decreasing share of active people in rural areas, including young workers (ILOSTAT, 2020). In 2008-2018, the share of active workers in RESOE rural areas has significantly decreased by 10 percentage points from almost 35% (1.1 million workers) to 25% (748 000 workers). The share of young workers in RESOE rural areas also decreased by 10 percentage points in the same period, from 33% (317 000) to 23% (145 000). In addition, more than 34% of entrepreneurs in the four RESOE regions were located in rural areas in 2018, almost twice above Spain (18%). Contrary to national trends, community services (which includes tourism and social services) increased their employment share in rural areas between 2008 and 2018, from 15% to 24%, in the RESOE macro-region.

Nevertheless, rural entrepreneurs of the RESOE macro-region face several challenges that hamper their growth opportunities, including:

- *Brain drain.* High outmigration flows of young talent, in search of job and academic opportunities in the cities, have led to brain drain in rural areas. The little generational turnover in rural businesses after the retirement of their owners accentuates this challenge.
- *Access to information.* Rural entrepreneurs have limited access to offline sources of information compared to urban entrepreneurs, which can lead to lasting gaps in performance (Koo & Eesley, 2020).
- *Access to finance and multiplication of administrative procedures.* Licensing procedures for rural entrepreneurs can sometimes take over a year or more. Moreover, public programmes of financial instruments can be slow, which can delay the setting up of businesses and discourage entrepreneurship. Besides, access to funding from major funds, generally European, is difficult when applications are made on an individual basis.

- *Difficulties in setting up business operations in other regions.* Entrepreneurs face significant entry barriers and transaction costs as in Spain. Companies seeking to set up in another region or expand throughout the country are subject to 17 different regulations, one for each Autonomous Community.

In parallel to the regional action plans, which recommend improving the information available to entrepreneurs and access to sources of finance, the following actions suggest a path forward to implement entrepreneurship policies from a rural and macro-regional perspective to overcome the challenges faced by rural entrepreneurs in RESOE regions such as the difficulties in setting up business operations in other regions.

### ***Action 1.1 Promote a rural approach and macro-regional initiatives in the framework of the “Recovery, Transformation and Resilience” Plan***

Within the framework of the recovery plan “130 measures to face the demographic challenge”, aligned with the “Recovery, Transformation and Resilience” Plan, the national government promotes actions fostering entrepreneurship in Spain. Although the implementation of these measures takes time and involves a multitude of actors and ministries, it is important that their elaboration targets and takes into account rural areas.

The creation of a National Office for Entrepreneurship (ONE) aims to help self-employed and entrepreneurs to start up professional and business activities and to organise and coordinate the work of organisations that also support entrepreneurship (Gobierno de España, 2021). The ONE plans to collaborate closely with the existing Entrepreneur Service Points (PAE)<sup>4</sup>, thus becoming a future umbrella for entrepreneurship support networks in Spain. In this context, the Ministry of Economic Affairs and Digital Transformation should include a line of action that focuses exclusively on rural areas and rural entrepreneurs during the process of developing the ONE (e.g. invest in a platform to improve feedback from rural areas or organise events and trainings for rural entrepreneurs), as well as other initiatives (e.g. “Digital women entrepreneurs”). The strategic participation in different public/private seed capital investment funds, promoted by the recovery plan, should also be oriented towards financing innovative start-ups and SMEs in rural areas.

On the other hand, in the implementation process of some of the actions foreseen in the recovery plan (e.g. implementation of the action plans of the Digitalisation Strategy for the agri-food and forestry sector and the rural environment), RESOE regions could, through the RESOE task force proposed in chapter 3, cooperate to identify potential synergies and work together to overcome common difficulties. Once the actions have been implemented, the regions could continue this cooperation by organising joint evaluation processes and identifying areas for improvement that could benefit the whole macro-region.

### ***Action 1.2 Facilitate firm mobility and geographical expansion within the RESOE macro-region***

Regional governments of RESOE regions should make progress towards market unity and facilitate the establishment and operations of firms in other territories. Recently, the Community of Madrid, for example, has promoted the Open Market Law that is committed to the automatic recognition of licences for firms and professionals throughout the national territory. With the new regulation, the region does not require

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<sup>4</sup> Currently, the RESOE macro-region has 418 Entrepreneur Service Points (*Puntos de Atención al Emprendedor - PAE*) – most of them located in Castilla y León and Galicia – which are responsible for facilitating the creation of new companies and the development of their activity, through the provision of information services, processing of documentation, advice, training and support for business financing.



any type of licence or additional authorisation for any company that is already operating, established and authorised in another Autonomous Community. Each RESOE region could consider the adoption of a similar law, which could contribute to reduce unnecessary regulations and administrative burdens, promote the arrival of investments and help boost economic activity in the RESOE macro-region.

## **Recommendation 2: Develop a joint vision on smart specialisation and innovation for the macro-region**

The 2021-2027 Smart Specialisation strategies of the four regions are one of the conditions for receiving European Union funds and constitute the main instrument for regional economic transformation and innovation.<sup>5</sup> While they capitalise on regional comparative advantages and local assets, they also set out and reflect on where the regions want to direct their future (e.g. digital transformation).

The new Smart Specialisation strategies seek to emphasise emerging sectors, propitious for the development of the rural economy and for the promotion of new technologies. RESOE regions are targeting sectors with significant growth potential such as the bioeconomy, biotechnology, cyber-security, renewable energies and the agri-food sector. They are also exploring the potential of agrotourism, eco-tourism, and cultural and historical tourism in their regions through long-term regional tourism strategies (e.g. Asturian Tourism Strategy 2020-2030). These strategies will be reinforced by the future sectoral innovation hubs that the national government will create within the framework of the *Plan España Nación Emprendedora*. These hubs will bring together several large companies from the same sector in order to incubate start-ups and foster innovation.

In this context, the RESOE macro-region, in its broadest form (including the regions of Central and Northern Portugal in addition to the four Spanish regions), has commissioned the Conference of Rectors of Universities and Polytechnic Institutes of Southwestern Europe (CRUSOE) the preparation of a macro-regional smart specialisation strategy (RIS-3), based on the analysis of the previous regional RIS-3 and on the RIS3T cross-border smart specialisation strategy between Galicia and North Portugal, pioneer in Europe. Throughout 2020, the CRUSOE network has held bilateral meetings with each of the regional governments to work on a macro-regional RIS-3. At the last CRUSOE Assembly Plenary in March 2021, this common strategy had not yet been presented (Red CRUSOE, 2021).

Despite these initiatives, during the submission process for smart specialisation strategies (RIS-3), the Autonomous Communities are mainly concentrating on their own regional plans. Although there is potential for the development of a macro-regional smart specialisation joint vision, there are so far few incentives for regions to collaborate with each other both during the process and in the allocation of funds.

The four RESOE regions present common challenges, from significant youth unemployment to rural depopulation, as well as shared opportunities, such as their innovative potential and their capacity to take advantage of emerging sectors. In this context, to the regions could benefit from strengthening collaboration on smart specialisation, innovation and knowledge-based economy.

### **Action 2.1. Develop an integrated vision and cooperation on smart specialisation and innovation**

RESOE regions should develop an integrated vision and greater cooperation on sectoral specialisation. The strategic specialisations of other regions with complementary capabilities is fundamental to avoid

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<sup>5</sup> The smart specialisation strategies (RIS-3) are the enabling condition for receiving support of the European Regional Development Fund (ERDF). To fulfil the enabling condition, the regulation requests a national or regional RIS-3.

duplication and lower effectiveness (OECD, OECD Territorial Reviews: Northern Sparsely Populated Areas, 2017). Joining forces in this area would allow RESOE regions to present a common plan to tackle depopulation and to access European funds. The negotiations on the Spanish Partnership Agreement (PA) and connected regional and sectoral Operational Programmes (OPs)<sup>6</sup> for the next period 2021-2027 will run until the end of 2022. In this new programming period, which will include a bigger focus on demographic challenges, Spain will prioritise investments to foster development in low density areas and regions affected by depopulation. In this context, RESOE regions could discuss and agree on common priority areas, objectives and actions (to be included in their OPs) in order to set up a common list of joint or integrated investment proposals in line with their smart specialisation and innovation strategies.

These efforts could be complemented with a cooperation network between RESOE regions in strategic sectors such as rural tourism. The potential of touristic niches (e.g. tourism for the elderly or families with children, sports and hiking, archaeological-cultural tourism, gastronomic tourism, or religious tourism) provides a great opportunity to foster inter-regional cooperation, which is currently significantly low. This enhanced cooperation would allow the promotion of inter-regional tourism circuits that benefit several regions simultaneously and allow niche tourists to discover new regions.

### ***Action 2.2. Encourage cooperation between RESOE universities to link regional innovation and smart specialisation strategies to regional job opportunities***

Through CRUSOE, RESOE regions should encourage a strengthened cooperation between the main macro-region's universities (e.g. Cantabria, Burgos, Santiago de Compostela, A Coruña, Vigo, León, and Salamanca, among others) and polytechnic institutes to better connect regional innovation strategies with regional job opportunities in rural areas and to foster inter-regional research collaborations.

Universities, polytechnic institutes and vocational education and training (VET) schools, in cooperation with employment agencies and business support agencies, should organise talent meetings between final-year students and companies operating in rural areas of the four RESOE regions in strategic sectors for rural areas (e.g. silver economy or social economy<sup>7</sup>), as well as in companies specialised in digital transformation services. This macro-regional initiative would be a valuable opportunity both for entrepreneurs, who would be able to recruit young people from universities, polytechnic institutes and VET schools in four regions and attract talent to rural areas, and for new graduates, who would see their job opportunities expand. This network would also be an opportunity to strengthen digital skills in the macro-region and seize the opportunities of digitalisation.

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<sup>6</sup> Operational Programmes (OPs) are detailed plans in which EU Member States set out how money from the European Structural and Investment Funds (ESIF) will be spent during the given 7-years programming period. They can be drawn up at regional level (e.g. concerning a specific region or group of regions) or refer to specific policy sectors or themes (e.g. transport, environment, competitiveness), being these last ones normally defined at national level. Cross-border or interregional Operational Programmes need to be prepared also for the European Territorial Cooperation (or Interreg), which is an EC instrument to encourage regions (between or within countries) to set up joint strategies towards common goals.

<sup>7</sup> Social enterprises represent a major opportunity for rural areas. Rural entrepreneurship often serves a social purpose and generates activity at the local level. Services that are commonly absent from rural areas and that could be covered by social enterprises include basic health and education, transport, construction, access to bank credit, and recreational and tourism activities (OECD, 2021). The potential of social entrepreneurship is, however, yet to be fully explored. There is limited recent data on the geographical distribution of the social economy, but according to the Spanish Global Entrepreneurship Monitor 2014 report (GEM, 2014), Spain is the country in Europe with the lowest rate of Social Entrepreneurial Activity: 0.51% compared to 4.25% or 2.71% in Iceland and Finland, respectively. At the level of the Autonomous Communities, the same report highlights the low weight of RESOE regions, of with only Cantabria above the national average (0.74%) with a Social Entrepreneurial Activity rate of 0.80%.

In parallel, regional governments from the four RESOE regions should develop science and technology agreements within the macro-region in order to create macro-regional technology centres to support regional innovation strategies.

### **Recommendation 3: Increase cooperation for the implementation of broadband connectivity and the digitalisation of public services in rural areas**

Available broadband access data shows that Spain has good overall access throughout its territory. In 2020, 95% of Spanish households had internet broadband access, only surpassed, at the OECD level, by Korea, Iceland, Netherlands and Norway, and well ahead of countries such as France (83% in 2019) (OECD, 2021). In addition, Spain has the seventh fastest broadband in the world, with an average download speed of 160.4 Mbps (Compare The Market, 2021).

Speed data from Spain shows digital gaps within the RESOE macro-region and in rural areas in particular (Annex 2.A). Furthermore, in Spain, 30% of individuals living in rural areas have basic digital skills, in contrast with 63% in cities (OECD, 2020). In Spain, however, 93.2% of individuals use Internet in a regular basis, four percentage points above the OECD average. In addition, 63% of Spanish individuals in 2020 use the Internet for visiting or interacting with public authorities' websites, more than 2 percentage points above the OECD average and 7 percentage points above the European Union's average (OECD, 2020).

Spain has multiplied its efforts to deploy broadband in its territory. The Spanish government's "Plan for Connectivity and Digital Infrastructure" aims to achieve 100% coverage with 100 Mbps networks for the entire population by 2025 (Gobierno de España, 2020). The main objective of the "Strategy to Boost 5G Technology" is to accelerate the deployment of this technology, which enables permanent hyper-connectivity. Both plans are supported by investment funds from the European Union's Resilience and Recovery Mechanism, including EUR 2 billion for extending connectivity and EUR 1.5 billion for 5G deployment. Among the public support policies for network extension, the main instrument is the Next Generation Broadband Extension Programme (PEBA-NGA). In parallel, the national General Telecommunications Law has created a favourable regulatory framework for investment by removing barriers and administrative requirements for the deployment of new fibre and 5G networks.

Taking into account the importance of digital services in remote areas where physical services are difficult to access, it is essential for rural areas to promote such basic services, which are set to grow in the future. The central government plays an important role in strengthening broadband connectivity across its territory, through fibre as well as effective alternatives with non-fibre technologies. However, despite recent efforts, broadband connectivity does not yet reach all corners of the RESOE macro-region and rural inhabitants have less basic digital skills than urban inhabitants.

In parallel to the regional action plans, the following actions suggest specific ways to foster cooperation between regional actors in order to increase rural broadband connectivity and develop local smart public services from a macro-regional perspective.

#### ***Action 3.1 Focus on improving broadband connectivity in areas with largest gaps***

Part of the European Recovery Funds should enable greater investment in broadband infrastructure, digital skills and digitalisation of public services in rural and sparsely populated areas of the macro-region with the largest connectivity gaps.

In this context, relevant actors from the four RESOE regions, including regional governments, rural municipalities, non-profit cooperatives, or mutual organisations, can coordinate actions – through the RESOE task force proposed in chapter 3 – to address these challenges, for instance, by simplifying and lowering the cost of broadband deployment through their oversight of planning permission, construction

permits and other regulatory instruments necessary (e.g. dig trenches for fibre). The national government can support these efforts through extra funding encouraging local control. Moreover, in order to improve connectivity in the areas with the greatest gaps and reach the entire population with ultra-fast networks, it will be essential to take into account not only wired networks such as fibre optics, but also other alternatives such as satellite, air coverage, 4G/5G, or radio technology, with lower cost and faster deployment.

On the other hand, public-private partnership models have been applied successfully to improve connectivity at both the national and subnational levels in OECD countries. These models, which combine public funding with private investment, contribute to changing the marketplace in a way that delivers long-term improvements in broadband provision and balancing the risks borne by taxpayers, with the potential to share in future revenue streams (OECD, 2021).

### ***Action 3.2 Leverage cases of best practices on smart public services across the macro-region***

Developing smart public services is essential to improve the future of public service management in local administrations. The RESOE macro-region should consider the development and implementation of a smart software platform for local public services similar to "Territorio Rural Inteligente" in Castilla y León. Through collaboration agreements proposed in chapter 3, the government of Castilla y León could advise the other three governments of the macro-region on the deployment of Internet of Things<sup>8</sup> sensors throughout the territory to manage services such as lighting, water management and waste collection. Moreover, the provision of smart services in rural areas can contribute to the dynamisation of the rural economy through increased investment by technology companies. Taking into account that "Territorio Rural Inteligente" in Castilla y León is co-financed by the European Regional Development Fund (ERDF), part of the investments in regional development focused on the 2021-2027 objective of a smarter and digitalised Europe could finance the promotion of the platform in the other RESOE regions.

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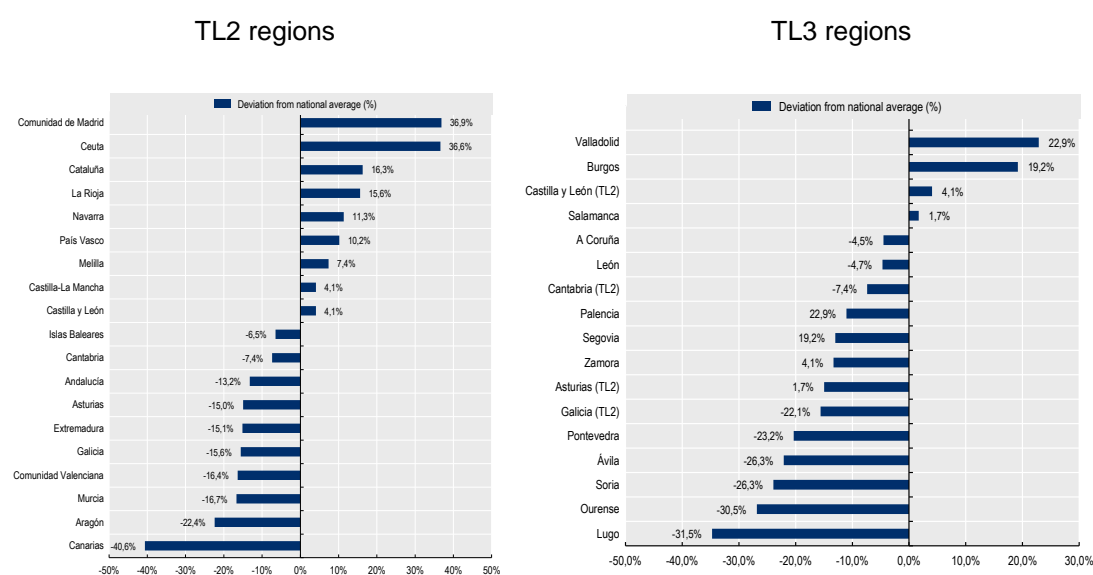
<sup>8</sup> The potential of the Internet of Things can also improve the management of agricultural and livestock farms, historical and artistic heritage and tourism. For example, sensors can help rural tourism businesses to rationalise their investment and business activity through data on visitor numbers and behaviour.

## Annex 2.A. Gaps in download speeds in the RESOE macro-region

Speed data from Spain shows that actual fixed download speeds experienced by individuals vary substantially across and within Spanish TL2 regions<sup>9</sup> (Annex Figure 2.A.1). While Galicians and Asturians experience, on average, fixed download speeds that are around 16% below the national average, inhabitants in Castilla y León experience speeds that are more than 4% above the national average. Digital divides are even wider across TL3 regions within RESOE. While Valladolid (Castilla y León) and Ourense (Galicia) have lower population densities and a similar surface and share of elderly population, inhabitants in Valladolid experience fixed download speeds that are close to 23% above the national average, while inhabitants in Ourense experience speeds that are over 30% below the national average.

### Annex Figure 2.A.1. Gaps in download speeds experienced by users in Spain by TL2 region and TL3 regions

Ookla tests on fixed download speed, gaps estimated as percentage deviation from national averages (2020Q4)



Note: Speedtest data corresponds to 2020Q4. The data for average fixed broadband download Speedtests reported by Ookla measures the sustained peak throughput achieved by users of the network. Measurements are based on self-administered tests by users, carried over iOS and mobile devices. The figure presents average peak speed tests, weighted by the number of tests.

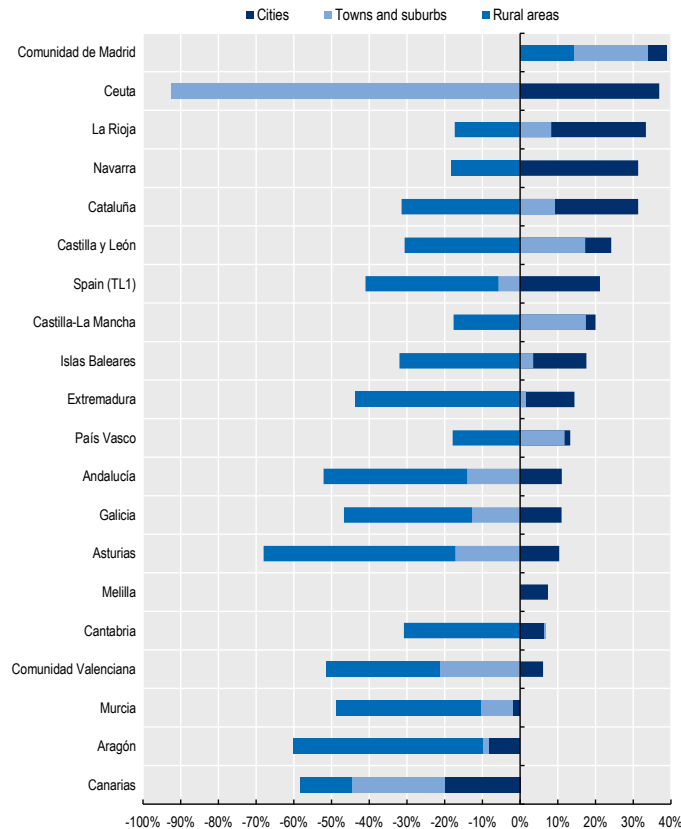
Source: OECD calculations based on Speedtest® by Ookla® Global Fixed and Mobile Network Performance Maps. Based on analysis by Ookla of Speedtest Intelligence® data for 2020Q4. Provided by Ookla and accessed 2021-01-27. Ookla trademarks used under license and reprinted with permission.

<sup>9</sup> Data from self-administered speed tests by Ookla is presented as deviations from the national average to highlight within-country differences in the quality of broadband connections.

Data aggregated by degree of urbanisation shows that people living in cities experience, on average, better connection speeds than people living outside cities in RESOE regions (Annex Figure 2.A.2). While inhabitants in cities of Castilla y León experience speeds that are 24.2% above the national average, Asturians living in rural areas experience speeds that are 68% below the national average.

### Annex Figure 2.A.2. Gaps in download speeds experienced by users, by degree of urbanisation, in Spain TL2 regions

Ookla tests on fixed download speed, gaps estimated as percentage deviation from national averages (2020Q4)



Note: Speedtest data corresponds to 2020Q4. The data for average fixed broadband download Speedtests reported by Ookla measures the sustained peak throughput achieved by users of the network. Measurements are based on self-administered tests by users, carried over iOS and mobile devices. Aggregation according to the degree of urbanisation was based on GHS Settlement Model (GHS-SMOD) layer grids. The figure presents average peak speed tests, weighted by the number of tests. Both Ceuta and Melilla do not have any area that fall under the "rural areas" category, and Melilla does not have any area that fall under the "towns and semi-dense areas" category.  
 Source: OECD calculations based on Speedtest® by Ookla® Global Fixed and Mobile Network Performance Maps. Based on analysis by Ookla of Speedtest Intelligence® data for 2020Q4. Provided by Ookla and accessed 2021-01-27. Ookla trademarks used under license and reprinted with permission.

# 3 Multi-level Governance

## Introduction

This chapter reviews the main features of RESOE regions governance structure, as well as challenges in the multi-level governance systems that can impede the effective provision of public services in the face of the demographic challenge. The main challenges in terms of governance that the four regions face are an unclear distribution of responsibilities and a lack of coordination between institutions and levels of government, a high municipal fragmentation, and the difficulty of local governments to sustainably provide services in the absence of economies of scale and fiscal constraints.

Given the difficulty of reforming the constitution and sub-national financing mechanisms, RESOE regions could further explore horizontal and vertical cooperation mechanisms. These mechanisms can serve to achieve economies of scale in the provision of services, reduce duplications in sparsely populated areas, enable cost savings by sharing production of goods and provision of services, promote exchange among peers and facilitate the coordinated implementation of strategies for regional and macro-regional development.

RESOE regions face overlap of competences, municipal fragmentation and financial insufficiency, combined with ambiguity in the division of powers between the national government and the Autonomous Communities (ACs) results in highly variable governance setups and frameworks across the country. By causing this asymmetry and high variability between regions, the multi-level governance framework in Spain becomes a complex network of periodic negotiations that endows the whole system with high instability and uncertainty (León, 2009).

After outlining the context of multi-level governance in the RESOE macro-region, this chapter assesses the main challenges in the region and offers three recommendations for the macro-region in order to collaboratively face the demographic challenge. First, the National Government should assume its role as the government centre to promote collaboration and strengthen the mechanisms for dialogue and cooperation that are already in operation but that remain underutilised. Second, RESOE regions could collaborate more in the provision of services, especially in bordering areas. And third, RESOE regions could explore further collaboration with Portuguese regions, taking advantage of European funds for cross-border cooperation.

## Context: governance structure and regional and local finances in RESOE regions

At the sub-regional level below the AC level, RESOE has 15 provinces and 2 741 municipalities. In addition, at the supra-municipal level, in RESOE there are 320 *mancomunidades*, one officially constituted *comarca*, 2 778 EATIMES and different types of consortia, all of which work as municipal coordination and cooperation mechanisms for the provision of local services (Table 3.1) (Box 3.1).

**Table 3.1 Governance structure in RESOE**

Territory	Population	Provinces	Municipalities	Mancomunidades	Comarcas	EATIMES*
Asturias	1 018 784	1	78	16	0	6 955
Cantabria	582 905	1	102	23	0	930
Castilla y León	2 394 918	9	2 248	242	1	6 175
Galicia	2 701 819	4	313	39	0	30 347
<b>RESOE total</b>	<b>6 698 426</b>	<b>15</b>	<b>2 741</b>	<b>320</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>44 407</b>

Note: EATIMES stands for entities with a territorial scope lower than the municipality (*Entidades de Ámbito Territorial Inferior al Municipio*). They are administrative units of a local nature, with an infra-municipal character. They are also known as minor local entities.

Source: (Ministerio de Asuntos Económicos y Transformación Digital, 2021), Registro de Entidades Locales (2021); Information provided by Ministerio para la Transición Ecológica y el Reto Demográfico.

### Box 3.1 *Mancomunidades, consortia and comarcas in Spain*

Together with LEADER and PRODER projects, and Rural Development Groups, *mancomunidades* and consortia (*consorcios*) are the most common and widespread mechanisms of inter-municipal cooperation in Spain. Both of these mechanisms – formalised in the Regulatory Law of the Bases of the Local Regime – are voluntary and are created for providing public services.

*Mancomunidades* are voluntary and flexible cooperation mechanisms signed between municipalities. They are flexible in three ways: 1) constitutive, as the process of creation is quite simple; 2) territorial, as city and town councils do not have to be contiguous; and 3) functional, as they can be created for a wide range of purposes, changing or limiting these as necessary. The main functions of *mancomunidades* are linked to economic development, waste management services, public infrastructure, environment protection, urban planning, and social services provision.

Consortia are more formalised cooperation instruments. These mechanisms allow for economic, technical and administrative cooperation between local governments, provincial councils, autonomous communities and even non-profit private companies, sometimes in the same service areas as *mancomunidades*.

*Comarcas*, on the other hand, are territorial divisions that generally coincide with a natural region that shares not only physical, but also human and historical characteristics. After the creation of the Autonomous Communities in 1978, the regions of Spain have approached delimitation and functional use of *comarcas* in various ways. In some ACs, *comarcas* only play a historical role, while in others they have powers and responsibilities to provide public services (e.g. Cataluña, Aragón and Castilla y León).

Source: (Feria Toribio, 2013); (Rodríguez, Menendez, & Cadenas, 2005)

Spain's multi-level governance structure is prone to an "hourglass effect": a significant amount of attributed powers and responsibilities at the regional and local levels, including a large share of public expenditure and investment, with fewer powers and responsibilities attributed to the intermediate level (provincial councils) particularly in terms of public service provision, expenditure and investment (SNG-WOFI, 2019).

Regions maintain a high share of responsibilities in all areas of public administration. Currently, the AC have powers in public safety, economic development, transport, environment, housing, health, culture,



education and social protection. At the intermediate level, the provincial councils are mainly responsible for internal administration and coordination. Over the past eight years, they have been slowly receiving some responsibilities from the pool of municipal competences. Finally, municipal responsibilities vary between mandatory “core competences” and optional tasks, but, above all, local governments are responsible for delivering public goods and services in the same areas as the ACs (Table 3.2).

**Table 3.2 Distribution of responsibilities among subnational governments in Spain**

Service Area	Autonomous Communities	Provinces	Local Governments
General public services	Municipal and provincial supervision (shared with the central government)	Internal administration; Coordination of local government with the AC and the State; Technical assistance to LAUs	Internal administration
Public Order/ Safety	Public order		Public safety; Municipal police; Civil protection and firefighting
Economic Affairs / Transports	Regional and rural development; Fisheries, hunting, agriculture and forestry; Tourism; Railways; Roads; Regional transport; Ports and airports	Cooperation in the promotion of economic and social development and in planning of the provincial territory	Traffic management; Road maintenance; Tourism; Public transport; markets
Environmental protection	Environmental protection		Environmental protection (+50,000 inhabitants); Waste management; Waste water; Parks and gardens
Housing and community amenities	Urban planning; Housing		Urban policies; Water supply; Public lighting; Cemeteries
Health	Health		Participation in first healthcare
Recreation, culture & religion	Museums; Libraries; Music conservatories; Cultural heritage; Promotion of regional culture		Cultural facilities; Sport facilities (larger municipalities)
Education	Education (shared); Universities (shared)		Participation in the design of education
Social protection	Social welfare; Social services (shared)		Social services allowances (larger municipalities)

Source: (SNG-WOFI, 2019), World Observatory on Subnational Government Finance and Investment (2019), “Country and Territory Profiles: Spain”, <https://www.sng-wofi.org/country-profiles/Fiche%20SPAIN.pdf>

This distribution of competences and responsibilities has been a topic of national debate since the promulgation of the constitution in 1978. The Commission on the Reform of the Spanish Public Administration (CORA) was created in 2012 with the purpose of preparing a report to improve the functioning of all administrative levels, leverage economies of scale, avoid overlaps and duplications, and establish simple and standardised procedures. Its creation led to the Law 27/2013 of Rationalisation and Sustainability of Local Administration (LRSAL), a large-scale drive to clarify the allocation of responsibilities across levels of government and reduce overlapping (Box 3.2). The current distribution of responsibilities has improved significantly after these recent reforms.

### Box 3.2 The 2013 Local Reform in Spain (LRSAL)

The Law 27/2013 of Rationalisation and Sustainability of Local Administration (LRSAL), also known as the “local reform”, is one of the most important decentralisation reforms and regulatory frameworks for local governments in Spain. This law modified the legal norms that regulated municipalities since 1985, after the implementation of the Regulatory Law of the Bases of the Local Regime.

The LRSAL aimed to clarify municipal powers and introduced the principle of “*one Administration, one competence*” in order to avoid duplications among administrative levels. It also tried to rationalise the organisational structure of the local administrations in accordance with the principles of efficiency, financial stability and sustainability, guaranteeing more rigorous financial and budgetary control and favouring private economic initiative to avoid disproportionate administrative interventions.

The law also established the conditions for municipal mergers, in order to limit infra-municipalism and promote more efficient public service provision. There have been only three municipal mergers since 2013: two in Galicia, one in the Basque Country.

Source: (Boletín Oficial del Estado, 2013)

Furthermore, municipal fragmentation challenges scale economies in service provision. There are currently 2 741 municipalities in RESOE, with an average of 685 local governments per region, while the average number of municipalities per AC at the national level is 478. These average values are nevertheless strongly influenced by the high number of municipalities in Castilla y León (2 248 municipalities) that in fact account for 28% of the total local governments in Spain. However, municipal fragmentation<sup>10</sup> (as measured by the number of inhabitants per municipality) in RESOE is high not only by European but also by Spanish standards. The average number of inhabitants per municipality in RESOE is 58% less than the national and well below the EU and OECD averages. Also, 92% of local governments in RESOE have fewer than 5 000 inhabitants, 8 points above the national level (Table 3.3).

**Table 3.3. Municipal Fragmentation in RESOE**

Region	Municipalities	Avg. Municipal Pop.	< 1 000 inh.	< 5 900 inh. (EU)*	% < 9 700 inh. (OECD)**
Asturias	78	13 061	23.1%	67.9%	74.4%
Cantabria	102	5 714	36.3%	82.4%	90.2%
Castilla y León	2 248	1 065	89.3%	98.0%	99.0%
Galicia	313	8 632	11.2%	71.6%	81.2%
RESOE	2 741	2 444	76.5%	93.6%	95.9%
Spain	8 131	5 836	61.5%	85.9%	90.4%

Notes: \*The European Union average municipal size is 5 900 inhabitants; \*\*The OECD average municipal size is 9 700 inhabitants.

Source: (INE, 2020), Instituto Nacional de Estadística, “Padrón Población por Municipio”; (SNG-WOFI, 2019), World Observatory on Subnational Government Finance and Investment (2019), “Country and Territory Profiles: Spain”, <https://www.sng-wofi.org/country-profiles/Fiche%20SPAIN.pdf>

<sup>10</sup> There are many definitions of *municipal fragmentation* in the literature, although most contributions use it as a horizontal measure: the number of local governments within a given tier of government, normalized by dimensions such as population or land area (i.e. “the number of governments per capita”) (Goodman, 2015).

The high degree of municipal fragmentation represents a major challenge for reaching an efficient and equitable provision of services for all four RESOE regions. The distribution of the population over many square kilometres and in a large number of local entities translates into a great burden for small municipalities that cannot reach economies of scale while maintaining equity in access. In particular, small and territorially dispersed municipalities find it difficult to evenly and equitably deliver services to their population. Such fragmentation also makes it difficult to generate economies of scale and make efficient use of resources, which in some cases translates into lower quality, or even a lack of municipal services in certain areas.

Finally, autonomous and local financing systems do not sufficiently consider the effect of depopulation on budgets. RESOE regions face financing challenges related to the current allocation of resources at the subnational level. For regions facing declining populations, the current regional and local financing system may not sufficiently consider the pressures exerted on local governments by shrinking tax bases and increased costs. Currently, the Guarantee Fund is based on a formula that takes into account the following variables and weights: population size (30%), surface area (1.8%), territorial dispersion (0.6%), insularity (0.6%), equivalent protected population (38 %), population over 65 years (8.5%) and population between zero and 16 years (20.5%) (Boletín Oficial del Estado, 2009).

Regions facing demographic challenges, including all four RESOE regions, consider that demographic factors including depopulation and ageing are not sufficiently taken into account. Insufficient funding ultimately hinders the provision of services, depriving small municipalities of sufficient resources to appropriately deliver key services such as school education and primary health (i.e. staff shortages) in lagging areas. Municipalities face similar financing problems as the ACs. Due to their high territorial dispersion and small size, they are often unable to take charge of their responsibilities. An exemplary case is that of the tax administration. Around 90% of Spanish municipalities have recentralised, either in the provinces or in the ACs, their responsibilities in terms of management and tax collection (Belmonte, 2013).

### **Recommendation 1: The National Government can assume an active role in promoting and better coordinating mechanisms of vertical collaboration**

Much of the duplication and lack of coordination between public administrations in Spain are due to the limited coordination role played by the national government (Arenilla, 2014). After the promulgation of the Spanish Constitution of 1978 and the consequent transfer of powers to the ACs, the national level limited its coordination role to managing conflicts of powers and responding to the needs of the regions with long and confusing processes of dialogue and negotiation. For steering national and regional development, an effective centre of government (in this case, *Presidencia del Gobierno*) is essential, as a strong leadership can help overcome administrative silos that undermine vertical cooperation and create ineffective duplications between tiers of government (OECD, 2020).

In the absence of a constitutional provision for coordination between the national and regional levels in Spain (Ruiz González, 2012), the past decades have seen the development of various vertical coordination mechanisms. These include the Conference of Presidents, the Bilateral Cooperation Commissions and the signing of collaboration agreements between the national government and the regions. These mechanisms, however, remain underutilised.

Utilising the mechanisms for vertical collaboration may require concentrated support to overcome political challenges and/or those associated with technical deficiencies in their designs or operation. The mechanisms for vertical collaboration should be nevertheless resumed, strengthened or redesigned to make the subnational public administration more efficient (e.g. separation of competences, avoid lack of coordination, improve the distribution of resources, etc.) and reinforce the multi-level governance system in Spain.

Achieving this goal may require the national government to play more strategic role by promoting a shared vision, common objectives and aligned policies throughout the territory. It is important that the centre of government re-asserts its role as a coordinator and champion of collaboration, since a higher entity capable of adopting this role and aligning visions between the lower levels of government will allow, on the one hand, a better legitimacy of the dialogue and coordination mechanisms and, on the other, the flourishing of more and new experiences of collaboration (OECD, 2018).

The national government should strengthen bilateral cooperation with the regions, endowing the Bilateral Cooperation Commissions with a strategic role for the implementation of regional development policies. Also, within the framework of the demographic challenge that affects RESOE, it is necessary for the National Government to lead a process of review and adjustment of the structure and governance of the Sectorial Conference of the Demographic Challenge.

### ***Action 1.1 Strengthen Bilateral Cooperation Commissions and the use of collaboration agreements***

To date, the Bilateral Cooperation Commissions have been limited to the regulatory sphere and to solve competency or legal discrepancies, but there has not been a collaborative spirit to use these mechanisms as platforms for the strategic definition of lines of joint action between the regions and the state.

Although formally the collaboration agreements are considered as instruments of cooperation of a bilateral nature, in practice the National Government and its different Ministries have gradually been promoting a multilateral treatment of the agreement policy, proposing the same, or similar text, to all or a large part of the ACs. As a result, a very significant part of the agreements signed are considered "generalised subscription agreements", since they have been signed with all or the vast majority of the ACs.

The two situations mentioned above could benefit from a change in the approach of the state and the ACs to the instances of cooperation. It is necessary for the National Government to lead a review process of these mechanisms and the adoption of a strategy to: 1) provide the bilateral cooperation commissions with a strategic role in the design and implementation of instruments for regional development; and 2) take advantage of the availability of collaboration agreements to strengthen ties with the ACs through joint intervention and investment initiatives.

In relation to collaboration agreements, OECD country experiences highlights that an adequate use of formal agreements for the coordination of actions between regions and the central government can strengthen trust between different levels of government. Iceland, for example, has been using five-year contracts since 2013 to coordinate the funding and implementation of regional development plans. Based on the experience of Iceland's Northwest Region, these instruments have increased the region's trust in the national government, as they have promoted its autonomy, strengthened its capacities, and limited budgetary and administrative constraints (OECD, 2020).

### ***Action 1.2 Review the structure and governance of the "Sectorial Conference for the Demographic Challenge"***

During OECD interviews with the four RESOE regions, officials recognised that due to the high number of participants ("high multilateralism") in the Sectorial Conference for the Demographic Challenge it is difficult to communicate and coordinate actions. For example, the Sectorial Conference agreed to create working groups but, so far, they are not implemented and there is little clarity about them (OECD, 2021). In addition, disagreements arise between the National Government and some ACs due to the limited participation of regions in the design and implementation of national measures with regional scope to address the demographic challenge (La Razón, 2021).

To support decision-making and the implementation of consensual actions, the National Government could launch a review of the structure and governance mechanisms of the Conference. This review would assess the current model and design, together with regional stakeholders, solutions that facilitate coordination between the various levels of government.

Importantly, the problem is not multilateralism, but rather how the multilateralism is managed and how it operates. The presence of many stakeholders in a dialogue forum is only detrimental when the internal functioning mechanisms are deficient. Therefore, the Conference should maintain its multilateralism and even evaluate the possibility of incorporating more actors in the future, as representatives of the private sector and civil society.

The objective of this review process is to improve communication and coordination mechanisms, specifically for the coordinated implementation of the 130 measures contemplated in the *Plan de Medidas ante el Reto Demográfico* in each of the country's regions. Specifically, the implementation of measures to improve public services and decentralisation, such as the Health Cohesion Fund (FCS), and advance in the reform of the autonomic financing system as stipulated in principle No. 10 of the plan.

Finally, the Government of Spain should heed the call of the FREDD for the creation of specific financing mechanisms to address the demographic challenge, exploring the possibility of introducing financial incentives for inter-regional collaboration. That is, to make available to regions with demographic challenges that present joint projects to face these challenges, financing instruments and or fiscal relief that benefit their implementation.

There are examples of multi-stakeholder, vertical coordination mechanisms in the OECD that, when well developed, have had a positive impact on the design and implementation of policies. One is the Forum for Sustainable Growth and Regional Attractiveness in Sweden. This body brings together representatives of the central government, national agencies, regional governments, municipalities, the private sector, and civil society, and it works well thanks to a well-defined governance structure, clearly separate forums and working groups, and permanent instances of dialogue and consultation (Box 3.3).

### Box 3.3 The Swedish Forum for Sustainable Growth and Regional Attractiveness

This forum brings together representatives from the central government and its agencies, regional governments, municipalities, private sector and civil society, and it has developed favourable conditions for a proper interaction between national initiatives and regional needs. It was created during the implementation of the National Strategy for Sustainable Regional Growth and Attractiveness 2015-20, and it is considered an important tool to support national and regional-level policy development through dialogue and cooperation. It has two groups: a dialogue space for national and regional politicians, and another one for national and regional civil servants. There are also complimentary networks and working groups.

At the political level, the forum has around 50 participants. The forum is led by the national-level agency responsible for regional development and it includes representatives of different subnational governments also in charge of regional development. The forum also contemplates the possibility that other representatives of government agencies are invited depending on the agenda. The forum, among other things, makes it easier for the Swedish national government to better understand demands at the regional level and adjust policies and projects in different areas to these particular needs.

Source: (OECD, 2017), *OECD Territorial Reviews: Sweden 2017: Monitoring Progress in Multi-level Governance and Rural Policy*, <https://dx.doi.org/10.1787/9789264268883>

## Recommendation 2: Deepen macro-regional horizontal collaboration

Currently, there are two horizontal cooperation mechanisms frequently used among ACs, including those in RESOE. First, the Conference of the Governments of the Autonomous Communities, which facilitates identifying shared positions of ACs in negotiations with the central government as well as through the Federation of Spanish Municipalities and Provinces at local level (SNG-WOFI, 2019). Second, the signing of legal instruments, which can take three forms: i) collaboration agreements, ii) cooperation agreements and iii) general protocols. Due to the lack of an adequate constitutional provision that fosters horizontal cooperation and limited political will to collaborate among the autonomous entities, the tendency to collaborate is very limited in all areas, except in cases where collaboration is necessary to obtain complementary financing (Ruiz González, 2012) (de Pedro, 2010).

Regarding legal instruments, collaboration and cooperation agreements differ in that the former are related to administration of services that are the exclusive responsibility of regional governments. The latter includes all matters that do not fall under the classification of "own competences". Collaboration agreements, unlike cooperation agreements, need to be approved by the Spanish Parliament to be executed, which represents a significant obstacle to the signing of these agreements.

Nevertheless, many ACs during the first half of the 2000s made reforms to their statutes to make these definitions more flexible and, thus, not need the permission of the national legislative power. This situation generates confusion, ambiguities and significant arbitrariness. General protocols, on the other side, are declarations of intent the ACs carry out jointly to establish lines of action for the development of regional legislation, the provision of some services and or the promotion of certain principles in their territories. Currently, these protocols lack of transparency since in many cases the ACs do not properly inform the central power about the establishment of these links (Ridaura, 2013), which is a requirement.

To date, RESOE regions have signed 20 formal<sup>11</sup> collaboration agreements with other ACs. Of these agreements, 10 involve two or more ACs from the RESOE region. In other words, the regional governments of the RESOE macro-region have 10 collaboration agreements with their neighbours in the macro-region. These agreements have been signed mainly on environmental protection (5 out of 10), plus some in labour, health, social services, transport and public order (Table 3.4).

**Table 3.4. Collaboration Agreements signed by two or more RESOE regions**

ACs involved	Area	Year	Brief description
Galicia, Castilla y León	Transport	2018	Renovation and subsequent preservation of the OU-124 road surface
Galicia, Asturias	Public order	2014	Civil protection and emergency management.
Cantabria, Cataluña, Andalucía, La Rioja, Valencia, Aragón, Castilla La Mancha, Islas Baleares, Castilla y León, Galicia	Environment	2010	Forest fire prevention and extinction
Galicia, Andalucía, La Rioja, Cataluña, Valencia, Aragón, Castilla y La Mancha, Castilla y León, Islas Baleares	Labour	2010	Training certificates for tattoo, piercing and micropigmentation applicators
Galicia, Andalucía, La Rioja, Cataluña, Valencia, Aragón, Castilla y La Mancha, Castilla y León, Islas Baleares	Social Services	2010	Coordination of networks of reception centres for women victims of gender violence
Cantabria, Castilla y León, Andalucía, Aragón, Cataluña, Valencia, Islas Baleares	Environment	2009	Reciprocal recognition of inland recreational fishing and hunting licenses
Cantabria, Castilla y León, Asturias	Environment	2009	Coordinated management of the Picos de Europa National Park
Cantabria, Castilla y León, Asturias	Environment	2009	Forest fire prevention and extinction
Cantabria, Asturias	Health	2008	Healthcare in the border area
Castilla y León, Galicia	Environment	2002	Forest fire extinguishing

Note: These are all collaboration agreements signed by two or more Autonomous Communities in RESOE and which appear in the records of the Boletín Oficial del Estado. There are other collaboration agreements between regions that have not been approved by the General Courts and, therefore, do not appear in the BOE records (e.g. collaboration agreement between Castilla y León and Cantabria, 2020).

Source: (Boletín Oficial del Estado, 2021), Boletín Oficial del Estado (2020), Search Engine: “Convenios de Colaboración”, [https://www.boe.es/buscar/legislacion.php?campo%5B0%5D=ID\\_SRC&dato%5B0%5D=&operador%5B0%5D=and&campo%5B1%5D=NOVI GENTE&operador%5B1%5D=and&campo%5B3%5D=CONSO&operador%5B3%5D=and&campo%5B2%5D=&dato%5B2%5D=convenio+de+colaboraci%C3%B3n&checkbox\\_solo\\_tit=S&op](https://www.boe.es/buscar/legislacion.php?campo%5B0%5D=ID_SRC&dato%5B0%5D=&operador%5B0%5D=and&campo%5B1%5D=NOVI GENTE&operador%5B1%5D=and&campo%5B3%5D=CONSO&operador%5B3%5D=and&campo%5B2%5D=&dato%5B2%5D=convenio+de+colaboraci%C3%B3n&checkbox_solo_tit=S&op)

Although the collaborative culture in RESOE could be richer, there are already experiences of successful collaboration in the macro-region, especially in areas such as the maintenance of national parks, fire extinguishing and provision of services (such as health) in bordering areas.

Castilla y León is one of the regions that has advanced the most in the use of these instruments, not only with its RESOE neighbours. In 2020, the region signed a declaration with the regions of Aragón and Castilla-La Mancha to promote joint projects within the framework of European funds that respond to the demographic challenge (Castilla y León, 2020) at the same time that they signed an agreement to share medical records and improve the provision of health services in bordering areas. The same year, the region signed an agreement with Cantabria that, among other things, contemplates cooperation in matters such as health, education, business development, infrastructure, communication and other services, and also makes explicit mention of the joint approach to the demographic challenge, indicating that both regions will “coordinate efforts to defend before the institutions and bodies of the EU that the demographic challenge

<sup>11</sup> In this case, “formal” means that the agreements have been approved by the General Courts, since there are other cases of agreements signed bilaterally by regions without notifying the national legislative power

*is a political priority and that adequate resources are allocated to alleviate the problems of depopulation in rural areas"* (Boletín Oficial de las Cortes Generales, 2020).

Furthermore, despite the work of the CORA and the enactment of the LRSAL, in almost all Spanish territories, including RESOE, there are overlaps of competences in areas such as health, education, regional development, tourism and culture. In most cases, these conflicts of overlapping powers translate into inefficiencies in delivering services and an inefficient use of public resources. In the context of the COVID-19 crisis, both in Spain and in RESOE there have been cases of duplication and lack of coordination between regional governments, provincial councils and local governments in areas such as health, maintenance of public buildings and delivery of social aid and labour. Recent examples include the lack of coordination at the local level in the maintenance of schools in Asturias, and coordination issues between the Cantabrian Institute of Safety and Health at Work and the Occupational Health Commission in the implementation of sanitary measures in Cantabria (El Diario Alerta, 2020) (El Diario Cantabria, 2021).

Currently, there are de facto, informal or non-institutionalised collaboration mechanisms for the provision of services between neighbouring regions in RESOE. Some of these cases have been formalised. An example is the agreement between Castilla y León and Cantabria that in 2020 formalised the use of the closest public resources, independent of the region, to provide social and health services in bordering areas (Junta de Castilla y León, 2020). Government officials at various levels have confirmed that there are several cases of successful informal collaboration instances between regions.

The RESOE macro-region could deploy a joint effort to identify strategic areas in which the four regions can benefit from the signing of agreements and the creation of instruments for cooperation with their neighbours. On the one hand, they could identify informal mechanisms for collaboration that are already working and, on the other, design new agreements. Finally, the regions can evaluate the creation of a dialogue platform between them (without prejudice to the fact that other regions of the area in similar situations, like La Rioja or Extremadura, may join), to discuss different alternatives and joint actions to promote macro-regional development in an institutionalised framework.

### ***Action 2.1 Map informal instances of collaboration between RESOE regions to seek formalisation***

The collaboration agreement between Cantabria and Castilla y León signed in 2020 for the provision of health services in bordering areas is an example of institutionalisation and administrative formalisation of collaboration that in many cases are already taking place informally and successfully. RESOE regions can benefit from the identification of these mechanisms for their formalisation and a systematic strategic use of this type of instruments to strengthen collaboration. The formalisation of collaboration mechanisms has the benefits of clarifying responsibilities between administrations, enhancing financing possibilities and facilitating coordination with other public actions.

To advance in these formalisation efforts, the four RESOE regions need to clearly identify those spaces in which successful collaboration with neighbouring regions is already taking place, especially in strategic areas to face the demographic challenge (health, employment, housing and telecommunications).

### ***Action 2.2 Design and implement (or formalise) collaboration agreements between RESOE regions to foster coordinated action and service delivery***

Once informal (or non-institutionalised) cooperation spaces with neighbouring regions have been identified, the regions should proceed to the strategic definition of those that may benefit from institutionalisation and then sign collaboration agreements within the framework of the established by its autonomous statute and the Spanish Constitution.



The objective of this effort is to ensure that access to public services for the entire population is established within the framework of flexible but formal institutional relationships that provide clarity not only to the administrations involved, but also to the beneficiaries.

Along with formalizing those mechanisms already in operation, RESOE regions can leverage the signing of collaboration agreements to implement some of the joint actions suggested in the chapter 2 of this common strategy, such as strengthening cooperation within the CRUSOE network to link regional innovation strategies to local job opportunities (innovation and knowledge-based economy), and advance in a coordinated development in the digitalisation of public services (service delivery and digitalisation).

### **Action 2.3 Implement a pilot Task Force for the Demographic Challenge**

The RESOE macro-region could benefit from piloting a Task Force for the Demographic Challenge, without prejudice to the fact that it may also incorporate other neighbouring regions with similar demographic scenarios. A platform of this nature would not only serve to improve communication between the regions and build sectoral meeting points to strengthen cooperation, it can also be used to coordinate specific actions and to coordinate common strategies for dialogue with the national government and the European Union.

According to the original 2010 memorandum and the subsequent macro-region expansions, RESOE was created with a vocation for inter-regional cooperation to promote a coordinated multisectoral impulse. In addition, it established four strategic areas for the coordination of this cooperation: transport and logistics, industrial competitiveness focused on the automotive sector, tourism, and employment and excellence in higher education and research.

However, these agreements and strategic guidelines have lacked concrete inter-regional measures for their implementation. In addition, the current mechanisms for dialogue and cooperation established in the national and inter-regional framework, such as the Sectoral Conference and the Forum of Regions with Demographic Challenges (FREDD) – which have elaborated documents such as the *Declaración de Cuenca* and the *Acuerdo de la Conferencia de Presidentes frente a la Estrategia Nacional ante el Reto Demográfico* – they do not seem to be serving as mechanisms for the implementation of concrete actions.

The RESOE macro-region could benefit from the implementation of a task force with a more flexible structure than conferences and high-level political forums, but endowed with design and decision-making capacity on public policies and with the specific objective of materialising the existing multiple guidelines and strategies in concrete joint actions. Also, this body could help advancing in the signing of collaboration agreements between the four regions by identifying priority areas and to streamline the implementation of joint actions suggested in this document, such as developing an integrated vision and cooperation on smart specialisation and coordinating broadband development in rural areas.

Some of the functions of this task force could be:

- Design and coordinate the implementation of concrete actions to materialise the guidelines in the various existing strategic documents;
- Serve as a space for active peer exchange and sharing good practices;
- Serve to coordinate block actions in the FREDD and the Sector Conference;
- Coordinate applications to European funds promoting joint projects either limited to the RESOE macro-region, or in accordance with initiatives emanating from the FREDD for all regions affected by the demographic challenge.

Inter-regional task forces and dialogue mechanisms serve to coordinate efforts among its members, exchange knowledge, identify joint solutions and contribute to the implementation of coordinated responses in emergencies (OECD, 2021). The Conference of Cantonal Governments in Switzerland, for

example, was founded in 1993 with the aim of promoting cooperation between cantons (TL3) on matters in which the cantons have responsibilities. This instance not only guarantees the coordination and flow of information among peers, it also serves as an instance of dialogue between the national government and the cantons in national and international affairs.

### **Recommendation 3: Territorialise and diversify areas of collaboration with Central and North Portugal**

In 2018, Spain and Portugal signed a memorandum of understanding to adopt an “Iberian strategy” against depopulation and aging in the border area. In 2020, this initiative materialised through the signing of the Common Development Strategy Cross-border (ECDT). This strategy aims to: guarantee equal opportunities, guarantee an adequate provision of basic services to all people, eliminate barriers and context costs, facilitating cross-border interaction, promote the attractiveness of border territories and promote population fixation in cross-border areas.

To achieve its stated objectives, the ECDT contemplates five strategic axes of intervention with specific actions for their implementation, specifically: 1) cross-border mobility; 2) physical and digital infrastructure; 3) joint management of services in education, health, social services, civil protection and other areas; 4) economic development and territorial innovation; and 5) environment, urban centres and culture (Spain-Portugal, 2020). It is a remarkable effort that makes a correct interpretation of the demographic situation in the Iberian Peninsula and takes charge of its confrontation with strategic guidelines and clear concrete actions.

Although this strategy is a highly valuable instrument for coordinated action in the face of the demographic challenge, it does not have an axis of territorialisation and does not consider the participation of the regions, provinces and municipalities of the border area. Nowhere in the does the ECDT mention Galicia or Castilla y León, nor the RESOE macro-region. In fact, the document does not refer to any territory in Spain, not even the four ACs that border Portugal.

The success of any regional development strategy will depend on the effective alignment of measures in all relevant areas of action (as the strategy already considers in key areas such as transportation and joint management of services), but above all it will depend on the coordination of all the actors involved (OECD, 2019) In this regard, the strategy requires that both regional governments and local corporations actively participate in the design and implementation of measures.

In terms of the existing cross-border collaboration mechanisms between RESOE and the Central and North regions of Portugal, the macro-zone could also expand the number of policy areas in which cooperation agreements are signed. To date, collaboration initiatives between Galicia and Castilla y León and the Central and Northern regions of Portugal have focused on cross-border emergency coordination (such as projects ARIEM and INTERLUMES), promoting tourism, as well as on education and cultural exchange. Regions could explore avenues for collaboration for the joint provision of health and education services, as well as in the stimulation of the labour market, the alignment of economic development strategies and the reproduction of measures to increase attractiveness of border areas. For this, Spanish and Portuguese regions could deepen efforts similar to those already carried out in joint initiatives such as the RISCAR project for the promotion of child’s healthcare or the GEMCAT project for the generation of quality employment in the cross-border area, both developed within the POCTEP Program. This recommendation is directly related to the territorialisation of the actions of the Common Border Development Strategy, so both actions should be taken as a joint effort.

### ***Action 3.1 Develop an action plan for the territorialisation of the Spain-Portugal Common Cross-Border Development Strategy***

The four RESOE regions could design, through a process of dialogue between the National Government and all relevant sub-national administrations, an action plan for the implementation of the Common Cross-Border Development Strategy (ECDT) that includes two phases: 1) the design collaborative (active participation of subnational governments) of concrete actions to land the "planned actions" of the document; and 2) the coordinated implementation of these measures through horizontal (between municipalities, provinces and regions) and vertical (with the participation of national governments) cooperation mechanisms.

### ***Action 3.2 Diversify areas of collaboration with the Central and North regions of Portugal***

The four RESOE regions can consider diversifying the areas for joint action with the regions in Portugal. This could be undertaken under the precepts of their Regional Strategies against the Demographic Challenge and the recent guidelines introduced by the Common Strategy for Cross-border Development. It could identify lagging areas where joint action can bring benefits to the inhabitants (i.e. Portuguese areas that are closer to Spanish health institutions), signing agreements and cooperation protocols and leveraging the availability of different sources of resources for their implementation.

The project for the Joint Strategy and Draft of the Structure of the Spain-Portugal Cross-Border Cooperation Program (POCTEP) 2021-2027, incorporates potential actions to be financed that are consistent with the need to diversify the areas of collaboration between both countries. Priorities 5, 6 and 7 are added to the lines of action to promote innovation, development of digital skills, cultural exchange, which seek to enhance cooperation for the creation of attractive living conditions, the development of cross-border joint strategies for sustainable development and the improvement of the multi-level governance framework in the zone, respectively. In these priority areas there are financing opportunities for actions to: improve access to employment, promote cross-border school exchange, improve accessibility, efficiency and resilience of health systems, promote legal and administrative cooperation, among others (POCTEP, 2021).

The territories included in the POCTEP 2021-2027 should take advantage of these of these priority areas to establish collaboration instances that facilitate the implementation of concrete measures to improve the lives of the inhabitants of their municipalities, such as the expansion of the initiatives included in the RISCAR project to other health areas that are sensitive in the region (e.g. health of the elderly) or training programs for the modernization of production systems in key areas of economic development in the region, such as agriculture and manufacturing.

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