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The Opportunity for a Sustainable Social Economy in Vacant Spain: An Empirical Analysis in COVID-19 Confinement

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Abstract: The COVID-19 pandemic offers an opportunity for the revitalisation of empty Spain and the development of new sustainable business models in a healthier environment, taking the competitive advantages of digitalisation and the benefits of contact with nature. This study presents a positive analysis of the situation after three months of confinement with the research objective of evaluating the potential for development a sustainable social economy in empty Spain based on the hypotheses presented. In order to demonstrate the six hypotheses put forward in the research, a review of the existing literature was conducted, socio-economic and environmental indicators from official sources were consulted, and descriptive statistics methods have been applied. Digitalisation, the social economy, the bio-economy, and the revitalisation of heritage seem to be the drivers for achieving the challenges proposed. By perceiving reality through a lens that values nature and creative intelligence, a new avenue of opportunities may be opened up, leading to an improvement in quality of life and well-being, and potentially retaining the rural population. Following this study, which assesses the opportunities, risks, and challenges and establishes a plan of measures, players, and resources for future implementation in vacant Spain, new lines of work will become available.

Keywords: well-being; bioeconomy; digitalisation; social economy; nature; heritage; social economy

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1. Introduction

During recent years, urbanisation has been the trend; by 2050, 70% of the world's population will live in cities [1]. In Spain, already, in 2017, 80% of the population lived in urban areas, with significant territorial imbalances [2]. Depopulated Spain is, today, a reality, a problem that began in the 1950s with the rural exodus. Today, almost 50% of municipalities are at risk of depopulation, with a population of less than 12.5 inhabitants per km^2 [3].

Populations in contact with nature and the absence of pollution would allow for a healthier life. The practice of nature-based prescriptions is becoming increasingly prevalent as a form of social or community-based healthcare, with the aim of promoting sustainable healthcare solutions. A number of studies have demonstrated positive outcomes in the reduction in blood pressure, depression, and anxiety, as well as an increase in daily steps [4]. However, there has not been a corresponding increase in weekly physical activity time. Additionally, studies examining the impact on individuals over the age of 60 have been analysed, demonstrating favourable changes at both the physical and psychological

levels [5]. At the physical level, these changes include reductions in blood pressure and heart rate, as well as improvements in cardiopulmonary and neurochemical parameters. At the psychological level, improvements have been observed in depression, stress levels, and quality of life perception. Forest walking, when undertaken alone or in conjunction with other activities, has been identified as the most efficacious intervention for promoting physical and mental health in older people. Furthermore, forest environments have been found to confer distinctive psychological and physiological health benefits when compared to urban environments [6].

Moreover, studies of this nature, with a focus on rural regions in low- to middle-income countries, are notably scarce [7]. These facts highlight the necessity for further investigation into the impact of forest environments and agricultural landscapes on diverse populations with regard to health.

On the other hand, research has been conducted into the accessibility and utilisation of information and communication technologies (ICTs) in rural contexts in Europe [8] and Spain [9]. Additionally, there are intriguing studies examining the impact of ICTs on the well-being of rural populations [10,11]. The enhancement of Internet infrastructure is identified as a crucial element for the rural population [12], although some studies indicate that public policies based solely on the expansion of ICTs may not effectively address the issue of depopulation [9,13]. Teleworking, which is closely associated with the utilisation of ICTs, has the potential to positively influence the reduction in rural depopulation [14].

Rural area reactivation would involve promoting their traditional activities with tourism and leisure and fostering spaces to deploy a digital, green, and circular economy [15].

This study is a positive look at the economic and social crisis caused by the COVID-19 pandemic during confinement situations, with the objective of demonstrating the opportunity for the development of a sustainable social economy in empty Spain.

The research conducted was structured in the following stages: a search and analysis of the existing literature related to the objective, the selection of socio-economic and environmental indicators from official sources, descriptive statistical techniques, a demonstration of the working hypotheses, and conclusions.

In consideration, six hypotheses have been identified as the key areas and issues needing attention in order to provide adequate support for the analysis of the potential risks, opportunities, and challenges.

In the research carried out to verify the following hypotheses based on the literature reviewed, the following can be extracted:

1. The most densely populated urban areas are the most affected by COVID-19.
   Prior research indicates that population density plays a role in the spread of epidemics, including the recent world pandemic of Coronavirus (COVID-19) [16,17].
2. The beneficial effect of being in contact with nature.
   The loss of human contact with nature has promoted research on the benefits of the connection with natural environments for human well-being [18]. The benefit that the relationship with nature brings to physical and mental health is recognised [19]. The confinement that the population suffered because of the COVID19 pandemic has valued the positive effects of natural environments on people's health [20]. Looking back at the research performed on restorative natural settings, the topic has received increasing attention [21].
3. The advantages of digitization for the repopulation of empty Spain.
   Information and communication technology (ICT) holds great potential in playing important and key roles in supporting global economic, social, and environmental sustainability [22,23]. According to [24], innovative processes will be critical for the

future competitiveness and sustainability of rural economies, with digitalization being key for the future of these areas. ICT is considered a key factor in the fight against depopulation in Spain [25].

4. The potential of the social economy to generate employment and revitalise rural areas.
   The social economy is being researched as an enabler of rural development and job creation worldwide [26,27].
5. Enhancing heritage to revitalise rural areas.
   The potential of culture and heritage to contribute to economic development has been receiving increasing presence in research [28–30].
6. The bioeconomy as a driver of rural development.
   The bioeconomy is currently under development and is one of the main current research ideas. Its implication for rural development is beginning to be analysed [31–33].

The empirical analytical approach to research with hypothetic–deductive reasoning is a logical, structured, time- and resource-saving, and reliable method of study based on official sources of information.

This study offers practical and public policy implications for addressing the challenges and seizing the opportunities for sustainable rural development, with the aim of improving quality of life and achieving balanced territorial development [34].

2. Materials and Methods

The research conducted in this work is fundamental and seeks to understand natural or social phenomena, discover general principles, and establish theories. In general, it is carried out with the purpose of expanding the body of knowledge [35].

An empirical analytical approach has been used [36] based on secondary source data [37] hypothetic–deductive reasoning [38]. This approach combines several methods and steps to address a research question in a logical and structured way. It offers a robust strategy for research, making the most of available data and providing reliable and validated results. An empirical approach based on data from secondary sources involves working with information previously collected and published by other researchers, organisations, or institutions. It allows for the systematic updating of the indicators used, saving time and resources. It is reliable because it is based on official sources of information.

The initial stage of the process entailed a search for relevant previous work related to the objective. Internet search engines such as Bing and Google and in the main open sciences journals were used to locate information and news related to the research, with the following keywords: affected COVID-19, welfare, biodiversity, quality of life, pollution, population density, depopulation, digitalization, social economy, employment, empty Spain, online training, natural, nature, opportunity, pandemics, heritage, rural, health, sustainability, telemedicine, teleworking, territory, and urbanisation.

The data were selected from secondary sources for the purpose of conducting descriptive and cross-sectional research [39]. This is because it is concerned with a specific demographic context and period, namely that of the Spanish population and the period of social distancing and confinement resulting from the global pandemic.

The information on the total of the Spanish territory was provided through the different websites. The selected variables corresponding to data by Autonomous Community are population density from the National Statistics Institute (Instituto Nacional de Estadística)-INE (www.ine.es, accessed on 1 April 2021), the number of COVID-19 cases and deaths from COVID-19 in the Dir. Gral. Salud Pública–DGSP (www.sanidad.gob.es/areas/alertasEmergenciasSanitarias, accessed on 1 April 2021), the protected forest area of the Anuario Estadística Forestal (www.miteco.gob.es/es/biodiversidad/estadisticas, accessed

on 1 April 2021), the weight of the social economy as a percentage of the Spanish Business Confederation of the Social Economy-CEPES (www.cepes.es, accessed on 1 April 2021), and broadband coverage (100 Mbps) of Observatorio Nacional de las Telecomunicaciones y de la Sociedad de la Información-ONTSI (www.ontsi.es, accessed on 1 April 2021). The autonomous communities of Ceuta and Melilla are not included because they are autonomous cities with particular characteristics that are very different from the rest of the territory due to their smaller surface area and lower number of inhabitants [40]. A descriptive statistical study was carried out, including regression models to relate the variables.

The variables corresponding to annual data for the whole of Spain were the annual number of teleworkers, Epdata-Agencia Europa Press-AEP (www.epdata.es, accessed on 1 April 2021), INE, and Randstad (www.randstad.es, accessed on 1 April 2021).

Table 1 shows the definition of the variables mentioned, the data collection technique, and the source of information.

Table 1. Definition of selected variables.

Variable (Units)	Definition	Data Collection Technique	Data Source
Population density (inhab/km^2)	Number of inhabitants (population figures) divided by the area in km^2 where they reside.	Official population figures for Spanish municipalities (Municipal Register, INE) in the area indicated by the IGN (Instituto Geográfico Nacional).	INE, IGN
Cases COVID-19 (nº)	Total cases COVID-19.	Total confirmed cases of COVID-19 by PCR until 10 May, and by PCR and IgM if syntho-matology compatible. The SiViEs application was used for the individualised case de-clarification on a continuous basis.	Dir. Gral. Salud Pública
Total deaths by COVID-19 (nº)	Deaths by COVID-19.	On the basis of the SiViEs application for the individual declaration of cases on an ongoing basis.	Dir. Gral. Salud Pública
Total protected forest area (km^2)	Forest area included in a Protected Natural Area (PNA), a Natura 2000 site, and/or a Protected Area under International Instruments (Ramsar wetlands and Biosphere Reserves).	Based on cartographic information with polygon geometry and associated alphanumeric database.	Anuario Estadística Forestal
Broadband 100 Mbps coverage (%)	Coverage provided by fixed networks at speeds of at least 100 Mbps, comprising HFC and FTTH coverage (two of the main types of fibre optic networks deployed in Spain).	Obtained by adding up the number of households with 100 Mbps broadband coverage in each of the municipalities covered by all operators.	ONTSI

Table 1. *Cont.*

Variable (Units)	Definition	Data Collection Technique	Data Source
Number of Teleworkers (nº)	Evolution of the number of employed people who regularly telework.	Obtained based on data from the National Statistics Institute: Labour Force Survey, Survey on ICT equipment and use in households, and Survey on the use of ICT and e-commerce in companies.	Randstad, INE, epdata
Weight of the social economy (%)	Percentage of the total economy accounted for by the social economy (cooperatives, mutuals, social economy business groups, other labour companies, and non-profit institutions serving social economy enterprises).	Data collection by means of a questionnaire distributed among the 32 CEPES partner organisations and consultation of secondary sources from the Ministry of Employment and Social Economy (until 2020), the Central Directory of Companies (DIRCE) Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food Platform of the Third Sector in Spain.	CEPES

A descriptive summary of the data is shown in Table 2. These data are analysed using descriptive statistics to find relationships of interest between selected variables, by using regression models to fit the data [41].

Table 2. Descriptive summary of variables.

Variable (Units)	Mean	Standard Deviation	Minimum	Maximum
Population density (inhab/km^2)	167.1	191.6	25.6	815.8
Cases COVID19 (nº)	400,001.6	51,691	4695	202,688
Total deaths by COVID19 (nº)	1817.1	2388	195	9129
Total protected forest area (km^2)	740,134	681,617	127,511	2,322,880
Broadband 100 Mbps coverage (%)	80.5	9.4	64	97
Number of teleworkers (nº)	91,863.6	695,119	600,000	3,000,000
Weight of the social economy (%)	6.3	1.6	4	9

In the case of the first 4 variables, linear regression models were sought to analyse the relationships between the variables.

Linear or linearisable and polynomial models have been evaluated (Table 3).

The model selected was the one that provided the best fit to the data, as assessed by the coefficient of determination R^2 (which varies between 0 and 1). The higher the coefficient of determination, the better the fit of the model to the data.

$$R^2 = 1 - \frac{RSS}{TSS} = \frac{\sigma_{XY}^2}{\sigma_X^2 \sigma_Y^2} \quad (1)$$

where:

RSS is the sum of squares of residuals;
TSS is the sum of total squares;
σ_{XY} is the covariance of X and Y;
σ_X^2 is the variance of X;
σ_Y^2 is the variance of Y.

Table 3. Regression models evaluated for the data sets.

Models	Equation
Linear	$Y = a + bX$
Potential	$Y = aX^b$
Logarithmic	$Y = a + bLnX$
Exponential	$Y = ae^{bX}$
Polynomial	$Y = a + b_1X + b_2X^2 + b_3X^3$

This methodological approach integrated descriptive analysis and regression models to offer a comprehensive and detailed representation of the interrelationships between the investigated variables.

Regression diagrams and models have been obtained using the MS Excel database (2010) to describe the data and their relationships.

3. Results and Discussion

The results and discussion are grouped according to each assertion being tested, and a list of opportunities identified from the previous results is generated.

The related bibliography and the socioeconomic and environmental indicators identified for the four established statements is presented below. Analysis and discussion of the data are also carried out to demonstrate each of the assertions.

3.1. Hypothesis: The Urban Areas with the Highest Population Density Are the Most Affected by COVID-19

An analysis of the COVID-19 pandemic data from March to May 2020 (Figure 1) shows that the most affected populations coincide with those with a higher population density and a high national and international interconnection rate due to their traffic, mobility, and transportation [42]. Each person is a vector of contagion in a large city.

In the graph in Figure 1, the population density (inhabitants/km^2) is related by grade 3 polynomial regression to the total confirmed cases of COVID-19 by PCR until 10 May 2020, during the confinement, and by PCR and IgM only if the symptomatology is compatible. Ceuta and Melilla were not included in the analysis.

The following formula is based on the regression model:

$$y = -5 \times 10^{-0.5}x^3 + 0.3187x^2 - 10.07x + 23{,}515$$

To evaluate the statistical suitability of the model, the coefficient of determination (R^2) has been employed. An R^2 of 0.68 was obtained. A value of R^2 closer to 1 indicates a superior fit.

The x and y variables of the mathematical model represent

y: The total confirmed cases of COVID-19, the variable is trying to predict or explain.

x: The population density, the variable use to make the prediction.

The constant term of the model, 23,515, represents the value of y when x is 0.

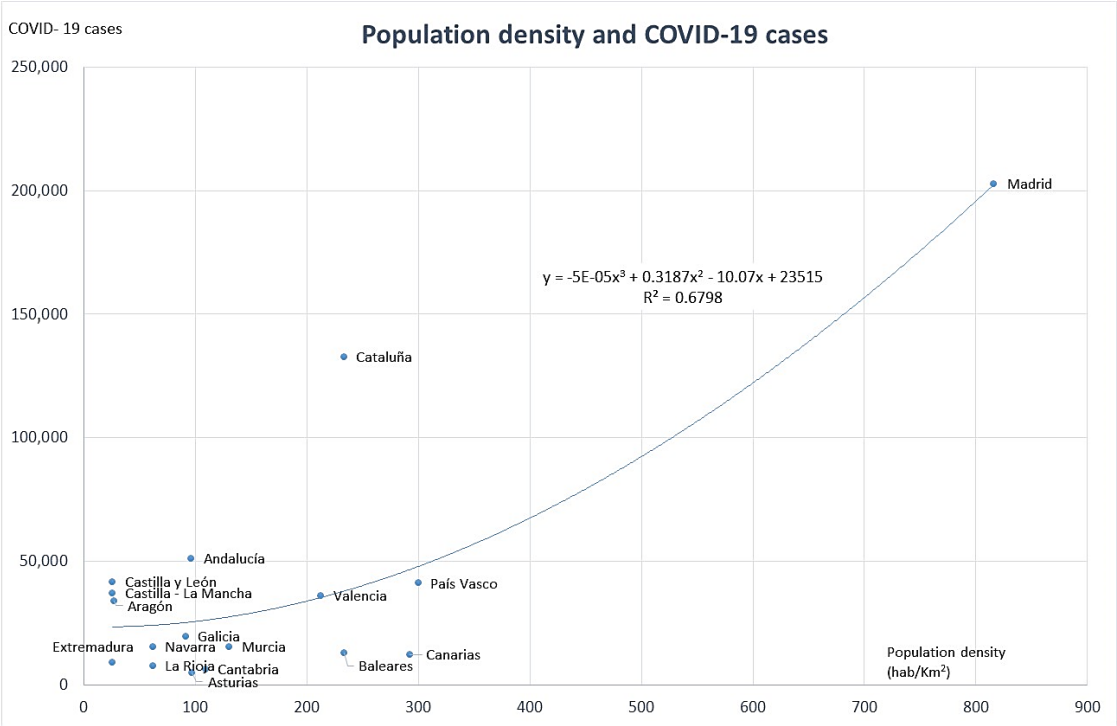

Figure 1. Relationship between population density and COVID-19 cases. Sources: own elaboration with data from the National Institute of Statistics 2018 and Dir. Gral. Public Health [43].

In the regression performed, Catalonia would escape, which, due to its population density, would correspond, according to the model of the graph, to several cases close to 40,000, well below the actual figure. The relationship between the pandemic and population density look clear. The Canary Islands would be the most favourable region as it distances itself from the model with fewer actual cases than those estimated in the regression. Madrid is a clear influencing point that conditions the result since there are no data from 300 to 800 inhab/km^2.

Confinement has shown its harshest face in cities and it is most bearable in small towns.

3.2. Hypothesis: The Beneficial Effect of Being in Contact with Nature

Confinement has shown its harshest face in cities, and it is most bearable in small towns.

Three months of confinement for COVID-19 were enough to make people feel the need to be in contact with nature. Several studies have shown that people close to natural and biodiverse environments have a richer microbiota and less predisposition to develop allergies. They strengthen the immune system, lower blood pressure and heart rate, generate greater cognitive control, reduce mental anguish, and improve general well-being [44]. Conversely, the lack of green space impacts physical and psychological well-being [45]. An increasingly international approach pushes natural open spaces' preventive and curative benefits to health and well-being, while conserving biodiversity [46].

The pandemic has enhanced the value of the natural environment by offering the opportunity to live in rural municipalities, thus improving quality of life [47,48]. In 2020, rural municipalities of less than 10,000 inhabitants are the only ones received more population compared to the average of the last five years, according to media reports [49]. The INE's Residential Variation Statistics show that 28% of the moves in 2020 were to small municipalities, 6 percentage points more than in previous years [50].

Figure 2 shows the relationship between the protected forest area (Natura 2000 Network, Protected Natural Spaces, and others) per inhabitant in each Autonomous Community and the total confirmed cases of COVID-19 per protected forest area by potential regression. If the symptomatology is compatible, COVID-19 cases were confirmed by PCR until 10 May 2020 and by PCR and IgM. Ceuta and Melilla are not included in the analysis.

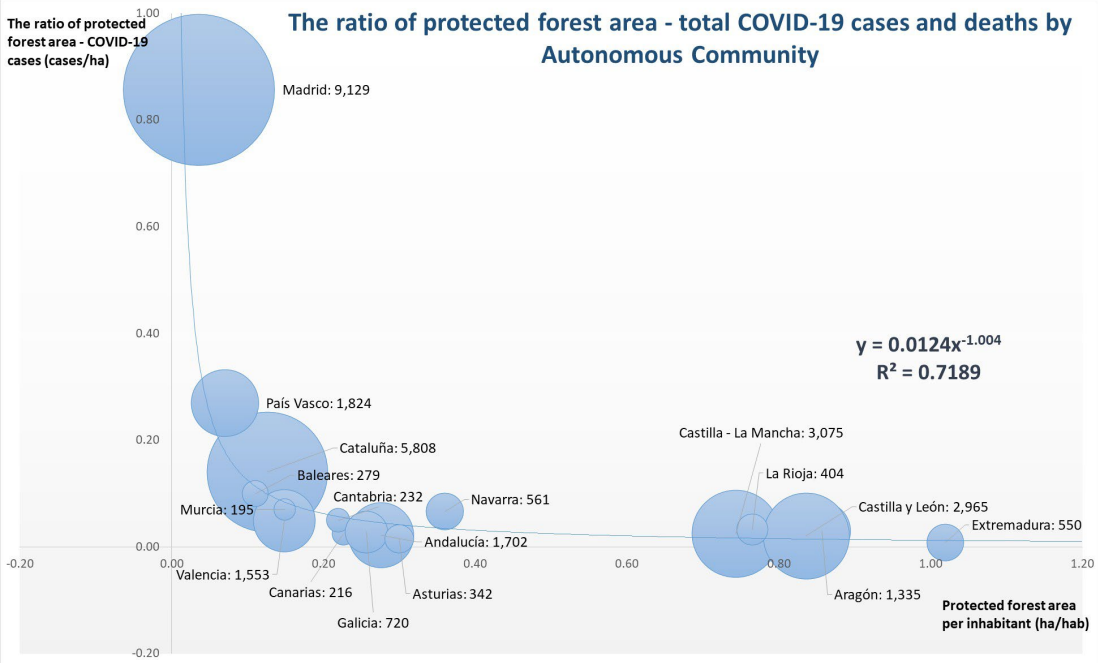

Figure 2. The ratio of protected forest area–total COVID-19 cases and deaths by Autonomous Community. Sources: own elaboration with data from the Anuario Estadística Forestal 2016 [51] and DGSP 22.9.2020 [43].

The following formula is based on the regression model:

$$y = 0.0124x^{-1.004}$$

To evaluate the statistical suitability of the model, the coefficient of determination (R^2) has been employed. An R^2 of 0.72 is obtained. A value of R^2 closer to 1 indicates a superior fit.

The x and y variables of the mathematical model represent the following:

y: The total confirmed cases of COVID-19 per protected forest area are the dependent variable. The variable is trying to predict or explain.

x: The protected forest area per inhabitant are the independent variable. The variable use to make the prediction.

The coefficient of the independent variable x: 0.0124, indicates the expected change in y.

The size of the bubbles corresponds to deaths due to COVID-19 from the beginning of the pandemic until May 2020. The graph may explain the defence of the protected forest area per inhabitant against COVID-19 infection during the confinement.

3.3. Hypothesis: The Advantages of Digitalization for the Repopulation of Empty Spain

The pandemic has boosted changes in residence thanks to digitalization, teleworking, and e-commerce [52]. Thus, the volume of online purchases in supermarkets and household appliances has doubled compared to the second quarter of last year [53], given the lack of mobility of Spaniards in confinement, according to industry estimates. Teleworking,

which was hardly widespread in companies, has been a measure that, by necessity, has been adopted by the business fabric. The number of people who regularly telework in Spain tripled in 2019, according to data from Ranstad, INE, and Epdata [54].

One-third of the companies have adopted telework during the pandemic will maintain it in the future, and one-fifth of the companies will maintain e-commerce, according to the survey conducted by INE 2020 [55].

In the same way, schools, academies, universities, business schools, other schools, and the academic sector as a whole have adapted its programmes to online training in a short time, having grown in Spain by 28% during the confinement, and with more than 1200 million students already relying on online training [56] who have been able to see in those months that training can be digitised, with its positives and negatives. Thus, entrepreneurs, farmers, and rural economy workers can be offered the proper training and education at the right time, which will help them professionalise by taking advantage of the opportunities of new digital technologies. For this, it is vital to have a high-speed digital infrastructure in rural areas, although half of the rural areas of Spain lack ultrafast network coverage, more than 100 Mbps [57].

The availability of the most modern technologies, particularly telemedicine, to health professionals in rural areas can be the revolution awaited in the sector, being closer, more accessible, and more people-centred. Digitization can thus bring services closer to the people with a considerable reduction in costs and a significant impact on the rural environment [58].

Secure and fast broadband Internet access is essential to connecting towns and increasing their attractiveness, favouring the access of their inhabitants to telecommunication services, e-commerce, e-government, distance learning, teleworking, and telemedicine [47].

In the 2018 Bled Declaration, the EU focused on securing an intelligent future for the EU's rural areas by developing an innovative, integrated, and inclusive rural digital economy to address the ongoing depopulation of rural areas [59].

3.4. Hypothesis: The Potential of the Social Economy to Generate Employment and Revitalise Rural Areas

The total impact of the values of social economy enterprises on the Spanish economy is valued at more than EUR 6.2 billion per year [60], of which 79.9% is associated with the employment of disadvantaged groups and 19.8% with higher employment stability. In Spain, the social economy employs more than two million people in direct and indirect jobs. In rural areas, agricultural cooperatives and societies stand out as associative entities with economic content, mostly micro-SMEs, representing 13% of the agrifood industry and 21% of its employment [61]. Social cooperatives and other voluntary entities work in social and healthcare and the cultural and educational services necessary in empty Spain; it is also a source of new occupations and favours access to employment for the most disadvantaged groups [62]. According to CEPES data [63], 7% of rural companies and entities are part of the social economy and employ more than 5% of rural employment. Significantly, 26% of people with disabilities are working in the rural social economy.

The social economy represents an alternative growth model that seeks a balance between economic efficiency and social and environmental resilience, which has proven to be more stable in times of crisis. Thus, employment cuts in Europe's 2008–2012 crisis have been more moderate in the social economy than in private enterprises, thus assuming a counter-cyclical function [62,63]. The social economy has great potential to revive neglected rural areas and correct territorial imbalances [64,65]. The social economy deploys the entrepreneurial culture and the business fabric in a spiral of local development by mobilising actors knowledgeable about their environment, harnessing the necessary local resources, and enhancing the value of cultural and natural heritage [15].

The social economy can bring to empty Spain sustainable economic development, a source of stable job creation, and better use of its resources and social and educational services, thus ensuring the area's population [63,66]. In addition, the social economy generates growth in the cultural dimension of integral territorial development by promoting a scale of shared values and local solid rootedness based on the cultural identity that recognises a territory and possesses a unique set of values [67].

3.5. Hypothesis: Enhancing Heritage to Revitalise Rural Areas

Cultural and natural heritage is key to sustainable social, environmental, and eco-economic development, a local wealth that enhances the value of the social economy. In the Culture for Development indicators [67], the concept of heritage encompasses places of historical and cultural interest, natural sites and landscapes, and cultural assets, as well as intangible heritage. It contributes to the revaluation of cultures and identities and to enriching social capital by shaping the community's sense of belonging. Its efficient management favours social and territorial cohesion. Revaluing heritage, whether historical, cultural, natural or scenic, is a commitment to territorial cohesion and sustainability.

As a valuable resource, heritage needs measures to ensure its conservation, transmission, and enhancement. The initial conservationist policies have evolved in the rural environment in the face of current challenges to more proactive initiatives that seek not only conservation, but also its recovery and enhancement, with the aim of fixing the population and conserving the natural environment, which is key to sustainable development. Thus, the Sustainable Rural Development Act includes among its objectives the conservation and recovery of the heritage, natural, and cultural resources of the rural environment through public and private actions that are compatible with sustainable development [68]. The Natural Heritage and Biodiversity Law [69] and the European Landscape Convention [70] support actions in the same direction.

Cultural and natural heritage provides a means of revitalising the rural environment through the promotion of traditional activities (hunting, fishing, artisan elaborations, etc.), sustainable agriculture, and sustainable forest management. Additionally, the promotion of natural products that replace the use of materials with a higher carbon footprint (plastics, metals, and cement) can contribute to this revitalisation. Therefore, this includes the use forest products (wood, cork, resins, vegetable fibres, and mycological products), as well as initiatives related to tourism and leisure that are tailored to the needs of the region (wood, cork, resins, vegetable fibres, and mycological products). These endeavours have the potential to create direct and indirect employment opportunities, thereby promoting the area and fostering social integration. Consequently, this could help to counteract the trend in rural depopulation. A community that is aware of and appreciates its heritage is likely to be concerned about the conservation of its environment and about present and future social welfare. This is consistent with the principles of social economy entities.

3.6. Hypothesis: The Bioeconomy as a Driver of Rural Development

Therefore, it is possible to make the just transition to a decarbonised, healthy, and fun society, where smart villages, designed with the participation of all and for all their inhabitants, are the new reality. Towns that integrate the different economies mentioned above, social, circular, green, digital, creative, etc., make the environment into sustainable places in which the culture of participation and social cohesion is fostered in coexistence with nature, natural capital, and placing value on the cultural heritage [71]. The transition to a circular economy based on the bioeconomy can boost rural Spain by generating higher incomes and employment, restoring ecosystems, and reducing greenhouse gas emissions,

and thus being resilient to climate risks, in line with the 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) adopted in the 2030 Agenda on 25 September 2015 by the United Nations [72].

The European Commission defines the bioeconomy as "that part of the economy that uses renewable biological resources from land and sea, such as crops, forests, fish, animals and micro-organisms, to produce food, materials and energy". In Europe, the bioeconomy represents a turnover of EUR 2.3 trillion and 8.2% of the EU workforce, according to the European Commission [73]. A definitive commitment to the bioeconomy in Europe, as a sector that will spearhead the European economy by 2030 and facilitate decarbonisation and the generation of rural employment, is reflected in the update of its Bioeconomy Strategy and the action plan to develop it [74]. The objective is to establish an innovative low-emission economy that reconciles the demand for sustainable agriculture and fisheries, food security, and the sustainable use of renewable biological resources for industrial purposes, while ensuring biodiversity and environmental protection. The 2030 Agenda, in conjunction with the Just Transition Fund established under the European Green Pact, can serve as invaluable instruments for the attainment of these objectives. In Spain, the objective is twofold: firstly, the production and marketing of environmentally friendly food and forestry products, bio-products, and bioenergy, as well as the development of rural areas [75].

The COVID19 pandemic has accelerated the process towards decarbonisation. The rural environment will be key to achieving the transition to a high-carbon economy [76]. The implementation of a migration from urban to rural areas would result in the decongestion of our cities, facilitating a healthier environment with an increased availability of green spaces and a reduction in traffic and pollution. Furthermore, it would contribute to a more comfortable lifestyle [77]. Economic resources will be needed, but even more so there is a need for people to lead this change towards a sustainable social economy, new leaders to catalyse the transformation of the territory, and industry.

Spain has the main ingredients to take action: the best professionals, the necessary technology, and the most attractive locations.

Perceiving reality with new challenges, placing value on nature and creative intelligence, will open up a new ocean of opportunities.

3.7. New Opportunities, Risks, and Challenges

The identification and analysis of the opportunities, risks, and challenges is based on these six hypotheses that provide a foundation for the discussion.

The following is a compilation of the opportunities identified in this study that are evident in the situation generated by the pandemic of COVID-19 for empty Spain.

3.7.1. Opportunities

A list of potential opportunities have been identified:

- The change in the population's preferences for a healthy and wholesome life.
- The enhancement of the intrinsic value of natural capital and cultural heritage.
- There is a growing tendency towards the adoption of practises associated with responsible and ecological consumption.
- The growth of rural, nature and mountain tourism, and wine tourism, as well as outdoor leisure and activities, has been a notable phenomenon in recent times.
- The development of organic farming and extensive livestock farming.
- The increasing enhancement of biodiversity and the Natura 2000 network.
- The commitment to decarbonisation, renewable energies, and self-consumption.
- The promotion of sustainable forestry management.
- The increase in the appreciation of services provided by natural ecosystems and forests.

- The advancement of renewable products (wood, resin, etc.).
- The development of nature-based solutions.
- The growth of the service sector, especially socio-health and educational services.
- The advantages of digitalisation and the progress of digital Spain with COVID19: e-commerce, telemedicine, online training, tele-assistance, teleworking, etc.
- The development of transport infrastructures in recent years.
- The development of culture, crafts, and the arts.
- Additive manufacturing and Industry 4.0, producing where it is consumed, and the Km 0 project.
- More affordable housing prices with better quality of life in rural areas.

However, it would be prudent to consider the potential risks associated with a hasty development of empty Spain.

3.7.2. Risks

The following risks can be identified:

- The absence of a sufficiently settled population gives rise to higher costs.
- The phenomenon under consideration is characterised by an absence of control and the resulting disorderly growth.
- An absence of governance and comprehensive strategic planning of the territory.
- The generational transition signifies an abandonment of traditional activities and cultural norms.
- The speculative activities in land and rural housing markets.
- The lack of access to essential services represents a significant obstacle to the well-being of the population.
- The inadequacy of existing Internet, communication, and transport infrastructure to accommodate the influx of new population.
- The absence of effective recycling, selective waste collection, and waste treatment facilities.
- The requirements of the recently arrived population have not been integrated into the existing social and physical environment.
- The insufficient supply of entertainment services for the lifestyle of the new population.
- The lack of empowerment of the population with regard to their development and autonomy.
- A deficiency in training and a lack of a skilled labour force.
- The current employment situation is unstable and offers limited opportunities for retention.
- The social and environmental conflicts between the indigenous population and the newly settled population are a further concern.
- The local population is facing an insecure situation in their immediate surroundings.
- The potential loss of biodiversity and increased risk of forest fires are two significant concerns.
- The lack of financial resources and economic capital available for the development of rural activities.

Being aware of the risks that may arise when dealing with rural development, a series of challenges are identified in order to take advantage of the opportunities offered by the current context.

3.7.3. Challenges

A set of challenges can be identified as follows:

- To base rural development on the principles and values of the social economy.

- To reiterate the significance and intrinsic values of social and natural capital.
- To recover our origins and our history and culture, and tell it in order to make it exciting.
- Identify, recognise, value, and communicate the values of rural areas (natural wealth, heritage, agriculture, gastronomy, well-being, quality of life, etc.). Enhance the value of the village and generate an attraction for its inhabitants, visitors, and investors. Social marketing to promote it.
- To carry out strategic plans that integrate the three dimensions (economic, social, and environmental) of the municipality with the active participation of all stakeholders. Development of creativity to build a long-term vision that is attractive and drives activity in the village.
- To provide villages with the necessary infrastructure (digitalisation, services, and accessibility).
- Training and empowering the population. To encourage intergenerational collaboration, we all need each other.
- To develop shared services with other neighbouring municipalities in neighbourhood associations.
- To encourage entrepreneurship with financial aid.
- Design new forms of financing: sponsorship, payment for ecosystem services by visitors and tourists, etc.
- To introduce the culture of mediation as a means of resolving territorial, social, and environmental conflicts.

The qualitative hypothetical deductive analysis carried out has revealed some practical and public policy implications for the development of rural areas as an attraction for a better quality of life for the population. These are as follows:

The improvement of transport, energy, and telecommunications infrastructures is required to integrate rural areas with the rest of the country, ensuring effective connectivity to facilitate access to services and economic opportunities.

Access to basic services such as education, health, and public transport must be guaranteed, with these services being adapted to the specific needs of the rural population.

The development of educational and lifelong learning programmes is also recommended, with the aim of preparing the rural population for the challenges and opportunities presented by the digital and ecological transitions.

Social entrepreneurship and innovation in rural areas should be encouraged through the provision of innovative technologies, financial support, and training.

It is recommended that rural communities be encouraged to participate actively in decision-making and project implementation, with a view to addressing common challenges and sharing resources.

Public–private collaboration is to be promoted for the implementation of projects that benefit rural communities.

Rural tourism is to be promoted by enhancing the natural and cultural resources of rural areas, thus supporting the local economy and preserving cultural heritage.

Fiscal incentives and subsidies are to be offered to attract investment and promote job creation in rural areas.

The coordination of national, regional, and local economic policies must be supported to ensure effective and coherent implementation, ensuring an equitable distribution of resources. Mechanisms must be created to monitor and evaluate the progress of rural initiatives and the impact of implemented policies.

4. Conclusions

The situation due to the COVID-19 pandemic provides an opportunity to rebuild empty Spain. The pandemic has hit the most densely populated cities and has placed value on open spaces and natural environments. It is a new way of perceiving the environment, where the big city is now associated with higher risks of contamination and contagion. In small towns, people feel healthier by being in contact with nature. Natural environments with high biodiversity contribute to the overall welfare of people and protect them from the spread of viruses such as SARS-CoV-2.

The development of telework and e-commerce during the months of confinement has accelerated the digitalization process, motivating people to move from the big city to smaller towns where they can live and work with a lower risk of contagion and a better quality of life. However, the digital divide is still a considerable barrier to full rural connectivity and the development of digital services.

The social economy has proven to be more stable in previous crises. Its intrinsic value has excellent potential to develop new jobs associated with the new economy—Creative Industries, Digitalization, Green Economy, Industry 4.0, Responsible Consumption, sustainable products, km 0, Low-Carbon Just Transition, electrification, self-consumption, circular economy, etc.—integrating economic growth with respect for nature and social development.

Digitalisation, the social economy, the bio-economy, and the revitalisation of heritage seem to be the means to address the challenges identified.

This study makes a significant contribution to the development of rural areas at risk of depopulation and to improving quality of life. It provides practical and public policy implications by focusing on the enhancement of rural well-being and the facilitation of balanced territorial development.

Further studies could extend the data collection period by one additional year, until the conclusion of pandemic restrictions in May 2021 [78], and then compare it with the post-COVID era. This would enable an analysis of the changes that have occurred and an evaluation of their potential impact on the findings of this study.

Future lines of work open up after this study that assess each of the opportunities, risks, and challenges and establish a plan of measures, players, and resources for their future implementation in vacant Spain. The subsequent analysis will evaluate the viability of this approach.

The viability of the opportunity must be evaluated in terms of its financial, technical, social, and environmental impact. Risks must be classified according to their probability and impact. Strategies must be developed to minimise or eliminate risks and assess whether we have the resources and capabilities to meet these challenges.

It is time to enrich the territory with new initiatives, be creative, and design rural Spain with the digital intelligence of the 21st century.

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