

EXTENDED ABSTRACT

INTERNATIONAL IMMIGRATION AND TOURISM IN RURAL AREAS: THE CASE OF SMALL VILLAGES IN CATALONIA

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This article is based on the HAMLETS research project¹ and analyses various connections between small villages, immigration and tourism. Migration is a very important factor in rural areas. During the last two centuries, the dominant trend in rural areas was emigration and depopulation in Spain as well as in most rural Europe. However, at the end of the 20th century, in some regions, a change in this historical trend occurred: an unprecedented arrival of urban population as well as international immigrants took place in the countryside. These flows take, in fact, very different forms: (i) lifestyle or amenity migration, in general characterised by an increasing number of retired or pre-retired people and/or young people with an entrepreneurial spirit moving to places considered to be more pleasant and/or with a higher quality of life, at least compared to their places of origin (urban areas in most cases); (ii) return migration, referred to former rural inhabitants who move back to rural areas of their countries of origin; and (iii) labour or economic migration, often characterized by the arrival of low-skilled migrants from developing countries who move in search of job opportunities. In the current global context, migration into rural areas can contribute to several of the major

1 The project titled “HAMLETS. Immigration and Sustainable Development in Small Villages” is carried out from the Autonomous University of Barcelona (2017-2020), funded by the RecerCaixa Programme (an initiative of the Association of Catalan Public Universities and ‘La Caixa’) and directed by Ricard Morén. See: <http://atlantis.uab.cat/hamlets/en/index.html>

sustainable development goals advocated by the UN's 2030 Agenda, such as the promotion of a sustained, inclusive and sustainable economic growth.

In this context, the article analyses the role that international immigration plays in tourism placed in rural areas in the Autonomous Region of Catalonia, Spain. In particular, we are interested in studying how these new residents develop new tourism businesses in municipalities with fewer than 500 inhabitants. The analysis of the results is structured in two sections: the first section focuses on Catalonia as a whole, in which aggregated statistical data on tourism and international immigration are examined. In addition, the second section studies -using material from interviews to key informants -the relations between the different types of tourism and immigration in a specific Catalan county (*L'Alt Empordà comarca*), with special emphasis on tourism entrepreneurs of foreign origin.

The presence of people born abroad in the 337 Catalan municipalities with fewer than 500 inhabitants does not follow a homogeneous pattern. Thus, there are municipalities with few/non foreign-born population and municipalities showing percentages of foreign-born people similar to large Catalan and Spanish urban areas (around 20% of the total resident population or even higher figures). The geographic distribution of these uneven numbers does not show a very specific spatial pattern. If we compare the map of the percentage of the population born abroad with the map of tourism accommodation (i.e. number of bed-places in hotels, camping sites and rural lodges), there is no correlation between the presence of foreign immigrants in those small villages and the tourism offer. Indeed, this correlation is not statistically significant. This information suggests a great diversity of situations across Catalonia: municipalities with a high presence of immigrants and a high offer of tourism accommodation, municipalities also having a large number of foreign population but a very low tourism accommodation offer, as well as other intermediate situations. However, the greater presence of international immigrants in many cases coincides with municipalities with a high offer of tourism accommodation, especially in the hotel sector, while a low presence of international immigrants usually coincides with a notable offer of accommodation in rural lodges. This evidence points at a two-tier labour model associated with tourism (hotels needing a relatively high number of immigrant workers, while rural tourism accommodation needs less workforce, since this need is generally covered by family members).

For the qualitative analysis, *L'Alt Empordà* was selected because this county is a paradigmatic case of the small villages of Catalonia: i) This is a territory located in a very important tourism destination (the Costa Brava region); ii) Its tourism offer is mostly concentrated on the coastal municipalities (just one of them being a small village) but there is a relevant rural tourism activity in several inland small villages too; iii) *L'Alt Empordà* also stands out for being one of the counties with the higher number of small villages in Catalonia: twenty-nine of its municipalities (40% of the total) have fewer than 500 registered inhabitants. These 29 municipalities account for 7,755 inhabitants, which represents 5.2% of the county's population. The small villages of *L'Alt Empordà* have a quite heterogeneous tourism profile, with a notable presence of municipalities (approximately half) with a diversified accommodation offer and not an excessively high number of bed-places on offer.

Furthermore, L'Alt Empordà is a county with a substantial presence of foreign-born populations. These international residents can be found both in the coastal tourism resorts and in the inland small villages. The latter places have a more rural character and a more diversified economy, often including a relevant primary sector. In fact, the foreign-born population can be found in all small villages of L'Alt Empordà. According to official statistics (2018), 44.4% of the population of those small villages were not born in the same municipality in which they reside: 22.9% are inter-county immigrants (i.e. born in the Girona province out of the municipality of residence), 7.4 % interprovincial immigrants (i.e. born in Spain out of the Girona province) and 14.3% international immigrants (i.e. foreign born immigrants). Of the 1,190 residents of the county's small villages who were born abroad (15.3% of the total population), 493 (4 out of 10) are from countries belonging to the EU-25, and their immigrant profile usually coincides with the portrait of a life style immigrant, closely associated with either the residential tourism or the model of a tourism entrepreneur. The most frequent countries of origin are France (204), followed at a long distance from the United Kingdom (67) and Germany (52). This immigrant profile represents 6.4% of the population of small villages in the county. This is a percentage three times higher than the average for the whole of Catalonia (2.2%). Thus, this is a figure that indicates a certain specialization of L'Alt Empordà in this type of immigrants.

The qualitative part of the study consisted in documentary work, semi-structured interviews, participant observation, photographic work, and action research techniques in selected small villages. As for the interviews, during the spring and summer of 2019, a total of 17 interviews were conducted with immigrants born abroad. Most of them came from other countries of the European Union and were entrepreneurs or self-employed workers. This immigrant interview data was supplemented with several additional interviews with native key informants from political, business and social organisations of the county.

The qualitative analysis results suggest four types of relations between immigration and tourism: i) a relationship of immigration and residential tourism in small villages; ii) the role of foreign tourism entrepreneurship in rural tourism; iii) the relationship between rural tourism and the agricultural sector from the point of view of immigrants; and iv) relationship of immigrants settled in small villages with nature, culture and the so-called "rural idyll".

In the L'Alt Empordà case study, the immigrant flow defined as "lifestyle immigrant" could range between 30 and 40% of those born abroad. This migration flow to rural areas is mostly composed of people from Western, Northern and Central European countries. They have a marked tourism component, as they are largely associated with residential tourism, but also with immigrant entrepreneurs (very often in the tourism sector or in related sectors such as leisure). Interestingly, the HAMLETS project field work unveiled how some interviewed immigrants were initially conventional tourists or residential tourists who spent long periods in these municipalities and finally decided to settle permanently in them. Some of them did so after retirement, but others moved to these municipalities to start a new economic activity. Residential tourism explains the economic dynamism in some small villages and attracts international immigration.

This case study helps to identify the importance of residential tourism for small villages in relation to international immigration and rural tourism. Qualitatively, immigrant

entrepreneurs devoted to tourism play a relevant role for these rural villages, generating new activities and connecting different productive sectors, such as agriculture, art education or others that tend to establish symbiotic relationships and to encourage sustainable development. Most of them respond to a lifestyle entrepreneur model, which primarily values the quality of life in rural areas. This is mainly based on the good quality of the environment, tranquillity, mild climate (i.e., Mediterranean) and easy access to high quality services. These assets can be found in various L'Alt Empordà small villages analysed in this article.