Expanded abstract

Social Capital and Rural Development: A Case Study in Extremadura (Spain)

Objectives

Main Objective:
To analyse the role of social capital in fostering community resilience and sustainable territorial development in rural areas affected by depopulation.

Specific Objectives:

1. To identify the structural, relational, and cognitive dimensions of social capital present in Valverde de Burguillos.
2. To examine how trust, participation, mutual support, knowledge, and leadership interact to sustain collective action and local governance.
3. To explore the mechanisms through which local networks and institutional cooperation contribute to the generation of social innovation.
4. To compare the findings with European experiences in order to contextualise the case within broader rural development dynamics.
5. To propose policy recommendations aimed at strengthening relational infrastructures and replicating effective practices in similar peripheral territories.

Design / Methodology / Approach

The study adopts a qualitative, interpretive, and exploratory design, centred on an in-depth case study of Valverde de Burguillos. The case was selected due to its combination of severe depopulation and the sustained generation of social capital, expressed through community organisation, inter-institutional cooperation, and innovative practices.

The research was conducted between April 2022 and December 2023 and structured in four methodological phases. First, a systematic documentary review was undertaken, covering scientific literature, legal frameworks, and technical reports on social capital, ageing, and rural innovation. Second, institutional sources such as municipal agreements and project documentation were analysed. Third, qualitative fieldwork was carried out, consisting of 19 semi-structured individual interviews and one group interview with six participants, amounting to 25 respondents. Interviewees included technical staff of the *Envejecer en mi Casa* project, municipal representatives, association members, and residents. Participants were selected through purposive sampling to ensure functional representativeness within the local ecosystem.

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The interview guide was designed from the theoretical framework and refined during a pilot phase. It combined open and flexible questions with thematic blocks addressing trust, participation, mutual support, knowledge, and leadership. The average duration of individual interviews was 43 minutes, while the group session lasted 78 minutes. All participants gave informed consent before recording, and data treatment complied with the European Data Protection Regulation (GDPR, EU 2016/679).

The transcripts were analysed via ATLAS.ti, applying a mixed coding strategy. Deductive categories were derived from the theoretical framework, including bonding, bridging, and linking ties, while inductive categories were allowed to emerge from participants' discourses. This process enabled the reconstruction of the architecture of social capital in Valverde around five structuring dimensions: community trust, participation, support, knowledge, and leadership. The analysis combined theoretical categories with situated empirical evidence, providing a detailed account of how social capital operates in a small rural municipality affected by depopulation.

Results

The coding of the interviews revealed five conceptual groups that define social capital in Valverde de Burguillos: trust, participation, support, knowledge, and leadership.

Community trust was the most frequently mentioned dimension. It refers to the perception of reliability, spontaneous solidarity, and everyday cooperation among neighbours. Expressions such as "here no one is left behind" or "we trust each other to get things done" summarise this atmosphere of mutual reliance. The sense of community and the interconnection between residents reinforce this cohesion, producing strong bonding ties.

Participation also plays a central role. Local associations, such as cultural, women's, and civic organisations, are the main channels of involvement, sustaining community activities and events. Interviewees emphasised that "if the association does not organise it, it does not happen," pointing to the structural role of civic organisations. However, there are challenges: communication gaps, the concentration of initiatives in a small "project class," and the limited involvement of younger generations.

Support networks were identified as another pillar. Informal solidarity is a daily practice, as reflected in statements like "before calling social services, you call your neighbour." The *Envejecer en mi Casa* programme institutionalised this logic, creating a system of home care, tele-assistance, and accessibility. With €289,472 in funding, it trained 15 workers and created six direct jobs, showing how social solidarity can be transformed into concrete and sustainable services.

Knowledge was described as both a resource and a tension. On the one hand, residents expressed pride in their territory, emphasising situated knowledge and the ability to understand local needs without external imposition. On the other hand, historical burdens and generational divides were cited as obstacles that complicate broader inclusion. Nevertheless, collaborative learning and institutional recognition were valued as key elements in sustaining legitimacy.

Leadership was strongly associated with the presence of actors recognised by the community for their capacity to organise, mobilise, and mediate, often without holding formal office. As one resident put it, "she organises even small gatherings, and with that she moves everyone." These figures provide legitimacy, connect the local sphere with external institutions, and sustain continuity in community projects.

Research Limitations

The study presents limitations inherent to qualitative case studies. Its findings cannot be generalised automatically to other rural contexts, as they reflect the specific history and dynamics of Valverde. The methodology, based on discourse analysis, does not incorporate quantitative network measures that could enrich the analysis. Moreover, the results capture a particular period (2022–2023), leaving open the question of the long-term sustainability of the networks identified.

Implications

Despite these limits, the implications are clear. The case of Valverde confirms that social capital functions as a relational infrastructure that sustains resilience in depopulated rural contexts. The five identified dimensions -trust, participation, support, knowledge, and leadership- operate interdependently to reinforce cohesion, generate collective initiatives, and articulate external cooperation. The evidence suggests that public policies should not treat social capital as a residual or intangible factor, but rather as a political infrastructure requiring deliberate support, through investment in social infrastructures, inclusive governance, and the recognition of community legitimacy.

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Practical Conclusions

The experience of Valverde de Burguillos demonstrates that small municipalities can generate innovative and replicable strategies to address depopulation when they activate their social capital. Informal networks of trust and solidarity, associative density, situated knowledge, and legitimate leadership form a relational basis that makes it possible to design responses adapted to local needs.

The *Envejecer en mi Casa* programme exemplifies this potential. It translated community solidarity into a structured service system that improved the living conditions of the elderly, created employment, and strengthened intergenerational ties. At the same time, partnerships with universities and external agents expanded the municipality's capacity to innovate and to position itself as a reference in rural development.

These dynamics confirm that rural sustainability does not depend exclusively on technical or financial inputs but also on the capacity to invest in relationships, participation, and governance structures rooted in trust and legitimacy.

Originality / Value

This article provides one of the first in-depth analyses of how social capital operates in a Spanish micro-municipality severely affected by depopulation. By focusing on Valverde de Burguillos, it offers empirical evidence of how networks of trust, participation, support, knowledge, and leadership can sustain resilience and development in contexts of demographic fragility.

The value of the study lies in combining relational theory with situated evidence, showing how social capital is not a complementary factor but an enabling condition for collective action. By reconstructing the architecture of social capital in a concrete case, the research contributes to the literature on rural development, social innovation, and governance, while providing lessons that can inspire strategies in other territories facing similar demographic challenges.

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