

## International immigration and entrepreneurship in rural areas of the Spanish Pyrenees

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### Abstract

The academic literature on international immigration into rural areas has clearly identified two main international migration flows: retirement migration and low-skilled migration in farming. Yet, the emphasis on these two types of international immigrants has overlooked other types of incomers, such as professionals, lifestyle movers, immigrant entrepreneurs and self-employed workers who may potentially have positive impacts on local rural economies and societies. Filling a gap in the literature, this paper concentrates on immigrant entrepreneurship in the Spanish Pyrenees. In doing so, it explores connections between local economies, entrepreneurship, and lifestyle immigration. It also analyses the potential of immigrant entrepreneurs to contribute to local economic growth with the different types of capital they possess (e.g. human capital, social capital). Methodology, it is based on a fieldwork carried out in the Spanish Pyrenees between February and May 2022. Specifically, it has been carried out 31 in-depth interviews with foreign-born immigrants in two areas of the Spanish Pyrenees (Girona and Huesca). The non-representative sample is equally distributed among immigrant entrepreneurs, self-employed workers, and employees, and it was also balanced by sex and covered different ages, covering, thus, a broad spectrum of immigrants' labour incorporations. Our results add new evidence to previous discussions on immigrant entrepreneurship and lifestyle immigration, from the viewpoint of rural mountain areas. Interviewed immigrant entrepreneurs occasionally play a key role in the creation and introduction of innovative products in very specific market niches in farming and tourism in the Pyrenees. In this way, immigrants stimulate local economies, and help to strengthen values on sustainability, community and sense of place. Yet the companies they create are often limited in both size and capital, and these circumstances generally produce only a slight impact on local economic development and job creation in the Pyrenees.

**Keywords:** immigrant entrepreneurship, rural areas, Spain, lifestyle migration, Pyrenees, mountain areas, local economies

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### Introduction

European rural localities may face depopulation and ageing, which, in turn, might hamper local economies and make the territory more vulnerable to natural hazards and speculation (e.g., HOGGART, K. 1997; CAMARERO RIOJA, L.A. and SERRANO, J.O. 2021). This results in a Catch-22 situation in which the older population may not be able to continue with their previous economic activities, while

no new activities are created because of the emigration of young people. This pessimistic view is somehow counterbalanced by a perspective emphasizing visions of rural localities as offering a high quality of life for urban dwellers after pandemic times, even if this trend may be restricted to well-connected peri-urban areas (FIELDING, T. and ISHIKAWA, Y. 2021; STAWARZ, N. *et al.* 2022). Both views point to the complexity in deciphering the role spatial mobilities play in the future of

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rural places that are traditionally victims of outward migration and a lack of investment in economic and social infrastructure (see, for instance, GONZÁLEZ-LEONARDO, M. *et al.* 2022).

International migration towards rural areas is increasingly present in Europe. Indeed, international immigrants have prevented (or slowed down) depopulation in rural areas (BAYONA-I-CARRASCO, J. and GIL-ALONSO, F. 2013; CAMARERO, L. and SAMPEDRO, R. 2019), and they have played a critical role in agricultural restructuring and economic transformation in rural societies (WOODS, M. 2016), in a time when farming has ceased to be the main source of employment in many European rural economies (BOYLE, P. and HALFACREE, K. 1998). In the move to address demographic challenges and shift from an exclusive reliance on agriculture, several economic activities have taken on a heightened importance by making substantial contributions to the survival of many rural areas (POTTER, C. and BURNEY, J. 2002). Rural municipalities may, in fact, serve as laboratories since we will be able to watch the challenges and opportunities of mobility/migration processes as they unfold (BELL, M. and OSTI, G. 2010). These processes may be familiar in established urban gateways, but relatively new contexts of reception require closer attention in order to propitiate theoretical debates and empirical knowledge (MCAREAVEY, R. and ARGENT, N. 2018). Indeed, international immigration can remain important across Europe as, in the future, some rural communities may have to cope with allocations of different types of immigrants, while others will strive to counter depopulation and decline (MCAREAVEY, R. 2017).

On the European level, the public debate on migration tends to focus on macro-scale policies and solutions, even if the opinions expressed in these debates may be shaped by place-situated, local experiences. Today, small-scale initiatives are making a difference across Europe because communities devise locally produced solutions for immigrants' accommodation (MORÉN-ALEGRET, R. and WLADYKA, D. 2019). Examples of good practice at the local level may be transferred across Europe

and this would be especially valuable in rural municipalities where residents have relatively little historical precedent in formulating responses to immigration. In this context, this paper investigates the role of international immigrants in rural municipalities (less than 2,000 inhabitants) in the Spanish Pyrenees. By analysing patterns of international migration, it makes visible the variety and complexity of immigrant inflows into Spanish rural areas. Furthermore, the paper explores connections between local economies, entrepreneurship and lifestyle immigration by analysing the potential of immigrant entrepreneurs to contribute to local economic growth with the different types of capital they possess (i.e., economic, human and social capitals).

Theoretically, the article is based on the literature in international migration into rural areas, particularly the lifestyle migration which suggests that economic reasons lie well behind personal and family reasons for moving into non-urban areas, and the immigrant entrepreneurship literature which has mainly focused on immigration into cities. It also adds to the debate on the "new ruralities". This paradigm suggests that rural areas lost their main function of farm production and became increasingly transformed into places of consumption and leisure. In other words, in many regions, the countryside has diversified itself in functional terms (MARSDEN, T.K. *et al.* 2003; HRUŠKA, V. and PŘÍŠA, J. 2019). Furthermore, and in line with the objectives of this article, WOODS, M. (2016) highlights the potential of international migration to reshape ruralities with increasing transformational impacts and boosting rural economic growth, as some migrants have the potential to contribute to local economies with their skills, training, connections and, at times, their entrepreneurship.

The paper is structured as follows. The next section theoretically analyses international immigration trends in rural settings, as well as demonstrating how links between entrepreneurship and lifestyle immigration are rarely studied in the academic literature. Subsequently the methodology used in the re-

search project, upon which this paper is based, is presented. Later, the paper goes on to show the research results. These are organized in two sections: the first revolves around the patterns of international migration observed in the rural municipalities of the Pyrenees and the second focuses on immigrant entrepreneurship. Finally, some conclusions and reflections for further research are offered.

### **Theoretical background: immigration into rural areas**

The arrival of international immigrants in European rural areas has increasingly been addressed in the literature (i.e., BOYLE, P. and HALFACREE, K. 1998; JENTSCH, B. and SIMARD, M. 2009). The academic literature has long identified the key role of international immigrants, mainly from developing countries, in European farming (for a recent review on the topic, see RYE, J.F. and SCOTT, S. 2018). In the specific case of Southern Europe, international labour migration is particularly relevant for agriculture which is dominated by family-based small farms (PEDREÑO, A. *et al.* 2014; CORRADO, A. *et al.* 2017; PAPADOPOULOS, A.G. *et al.* 2018).

The literature has also extensively addressed retirement migration (primarily retired nationals from developed countries heading to less expensive nations). In Southern Europe, the literature has long pointed out the preference of Northern and Central European retirees for coastal destinations with a benign climate and a history of seaside tourism (e.g., the Spanish Costa del Sol, the Portuguese Algarve) and rural “idyllic” settings of beautiful countryside with a supposedly laid-back lifestyle (e.g., Southern France, Italian Tuscany; see KING, R. *et al.* 2019; ROMAGOSA, F. *et al.* 2020). This migration has been potentiated by an increase in geographic mobility, longer healthy lifespans and more people pursuing active lifestyles through migration to countries perceived as scenically, climatically and culturally attractive (KING, R. *et al.* 2000; HUETE, R. *et al.* 2013).

The emphasis on these two specific types of international migrants into rural areas has

overlooked other types of incomers, such as professionals (including doctors and nurses, who are crucial in post-COVID times), lifestyle movers (some of whom move to rural areas from urban settings maybe perceived as unhealthy and dangerous in a pandemic crisis), immigrant entrepreneurs and self-employed workers who may potentially have positive impacts on local economies. Indeed, immigrants have not only been shown to fill gaps in rural labour markets, but they have a great potential to contribute to economic growth with their skills, training, international connections and, at times, their entrepreneurship.

### *Lifestyle immigration and entrepreneurship*

Rural areas are very attractive for lifestyle immigrants who change residence, often internationally, in their search for a more fulfilling way of living (BENSON, M. and O'REILLY, K. 2009; KORDEL, S. and POHLE, P. 2018). Lifestyle immigrants have been defined as “relatively affluent individuals, moving either part-time or full-time, permanently or temporarily, to places which, for various reasons, signify for the migrants something loosely defined as quality of life” (BENSON, M. and O'REILLY, K. 2009, 621). Thus, migration is seen as constituting a part of life's trajectory, whereby destinations are chosen according to how incomers believe their life objectives could be matched (HOEY, B. 2005; BENSON, M. and OSBALDISTON, N. 2014). In this sense, migration might show more similarities with elite circularity and mobility than with other more traditional forms of migration such as labour migration (IBRAHIM, Z. and TREMBLAY, R. 2017).

In many cases, international immigrants prefer not to be employees and often opt for self-employment activities, in order to maintain an acceptable balance between the personal and work spheres in their new life (STONE, I. and STUBBS, C. 2007; CARSON, D.A. *et al.* 2018). Yet their companies are often limited in both size and capital, maybe out of fear that an excessively successful business could disrupt their ideal work-life balance (BENSON, M. and

O'REILLY, K. 2009). It has been found that the entrepreneurial activities developed by these immigrants are usually not related to previous careers, perhaps due to a break with their past (HOEY, B. 2005). These circumstances produce only a slight impact on local economic development and job creation (CARSON, D.A. *et al.* 2016). In fact, it has been pointed out that such entrepreneurs lack a future business strategy and are reluctant to employ workers beyond family and close friends (MÜLLER, D.K. and JANSSON, B. 2007). Among the elderly, processes of reintegration into the labour market have been observed in the countries of destination after retirement (EIMERMANN, M. and KORDEL, S. 2018).

However, some European case studies have observed that immigrant entrepreneurs have played a key role in the creation and introduction of innovative products in very specific market niches that had been little explored in rural areas, thus, stimulating local economies and helping to strengthen values related to sustainability, community and sense of place (YEASMIN, N. 2016; MUNKEJORD, M.C. 2017). These studies suggest that immigrants show a different sensitivity when it comes to valuing local, cultural and landscape resources, which, in fact, may be the reason for their arrival in the "countryside" (BARTOŠ, M. *et al.* 2009; IVERSEN, I. and JACOBSEN, J.K.S. 2017). They would, thus, have the potential to imagine local culture, landscape and nature as possible tourism products, as well as recognizing business opportunities that locally born inhabitants might overlook (BOSWORTH, G. and FARRELL, H. 2011; MATTSSON, K.T. and CASSEL, S.H. 2019).

In fact, the rural environment could become an innovative environment in which small businesses could eventually thrive (STATHOPOULOU, S. *et al.* 2004; GARCÍA MARCHANTE, J.S. *et al.* 2007), and the initiatives of immigrant entrepreneurs, perhaps innovative with respect to culture and nature, could translate into tourism products or brands (CARSON, D.A. *et al.* 2018; MATTSSON, K.T. and CASSEL, S.H. 2019). The literature on lifestyle migration has also pointed out that

immigrant entrepreneurs have the potential to establish networks between their former countries of origin and their new destinations (STAM, E. 2010; CARSON, D.A. *et al.* 2016), which would be in line with the "culturalist approach" in ethnic entrepreneurship studies. This approach highlights the role of networks forged within the immigrant communities in cities for understanding patterns of entrepreneurship, whereby access to social networks is related to "ethnic" solidarity, based, in turn, on expectations of mutual support among its members who share common cultural traits (RATH, J. and KLOOSTERMAN, R. 2000; SOMMER, E. and GAMPER, M. 2018). However, the capacity of immigrant entrepreneurs to create networks and social relationships in rural host societies has barely been addressed in the literature (KANAS, A. *et al.* 2011).

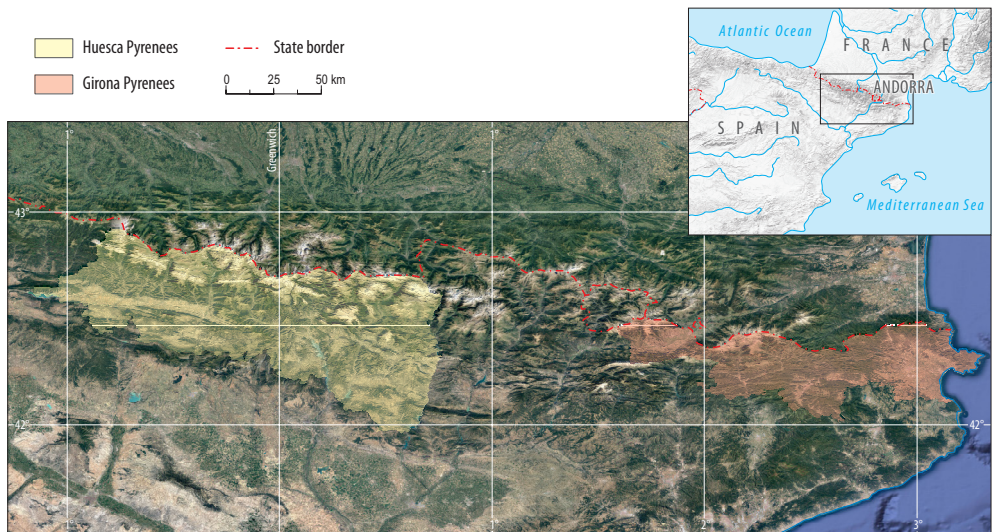
Moreover, the extensive literature on immigrant entrepreneurship in urban areas has often underestimated the role of human capital with respect to business (LEY, D. 2006; AMBROSINI, M. 2012). This is probably because education and work experience prior to migration might be considered of low quality and difficult to transfer to destination countries (CHISWICK, B.R. and MILLER, P.W. 2009), even though the possession of skills, work experience and other useful assets facilitates self-employment (see, for instance, LI, P.S. 2001; CONSTANT, A. and ZIMMERMANN, K.F. 2006). Furthermore, several studies show that educational level and training courses help entrepreneurs to manage their businesses and achieve economic success (e.g., KIM, Y.D. 2006; VALDEZ, Z. 2008). Other authors, in contrast, argue that education and work experience might decrease the likelihood of being self-employed, suggesting that self-employment is a survival strategy born out of necessity (ALIAGA-ISLA, R and RIALP, Á. 2013; BRZOWSKI, J. *et al.* 2017). This does not seem the case, however, with immigrant entrepreneurs in European rural areas, mainly from other European Union countries, who, in many cases, pursue business as a means to a more fulfilling life (EIMERMANN, M. and KORDEL, S. 2018; MENDOZA, C. *et al.* 2020).

## Methodology

This article is based on the EU-funded research project titled SURDIM (Sustainable Rural Development and International Immigration in the Pyrenees). This project analyses international immigration in the rural municipalities of the Pyrenees. It specifically studies labour immigrant pathways in both the French and Spanish Pyrenees to identify sustainable economic projects managed and/or supported by immigrants and present successful experiences concerning rural development. This project aims to contribute to improving territorial relations and integration in rural territories.

The methodology of the project consisted in multi-sited research that relies mainly on qualitative methods applied to carefully pre-selected case studies. Even if the project is binational, this article specifically focuses on the Spanish Pyrenees. Specifically, the fieldwork was carried out in rural municipalities (less than 2,000 inhabitants) of Girona (Alt Empordà, Ripollès and Cerdanya counties) and Huesca provinces (Ribagorza and Sobrarbe counties) between February and May 2022 (*Figure 1*).

A total of 31 in-depth interviews with foreign-born immigrants were undertaken in two study areas. Interviewees were selected through a snowballing technique. In the first place, local contacts from the public administration and entrepreneurial associations help identify foreign-born immigrants in the area. Subsequently, previously interviewed immigrants provided us with information of other possible research participants. Due to several ways of access, potential bias was prevented. Interviews were structured along three main dimensions – economic, social and environmental. Although the research did not attempt to achieve a representative sample, it is equally distributed between immigrant entrepreneurs, self-employed workers and employees. Immigrants are heterogeneous concerning their country of birth, being those coming from other European Union countries a majority. We tried also that informants were balanced by sex, even if women outnumbered men in the non-representative survey, and covered different ages, resulting in a broad spectrum of immigrants' labour incorporations. Finally, those selected for this research has lived in the Pyrenees for at least one year (*Table 1*).



*Fig. 1.* Study areas inside the Spanish part of the Pyrenees

Table 1. Profile of the interviewed foreign-born immigrants in the Spanish Pyrenees (N = 31)

Indicators		Persons
Province of residence	Girona	16
	Huesca	15
Sex	Women	20
	Men	11
Country of birth	Netherlands	6
	France	4
	Italy	3
	Argentina	3
	Great Britain	2
	Peru	2
	Other EU*	5
	Other Latin America**	4
Rest of the world***	2	
Age at interview, year	30–34	2
	35–39	2
	40–44	8
	45–49	3
	50–54	6
	55–59	2
	60–64	4
	65 and more	4
Year of arrival in Spain	Before 2000	7
	2000–2004	8
	2005–2009	5
	2010–2014	5
	2015–2021	6
Professional status	Entrepreneurs	12
	Self-employed workers	10
	Employees	9
Current legal status	Spanish passport	5
	Other EU passports	18
	Residence and work permits	8

\*Belgium, Bulgaria, Czech Republic, Germany, Romania. \*\*Brazil, Colombia, Mexico, Venezuela. \*\*\*Cameroon, India. *Source:* Fieldwork, February–May 2022.

The immigrants' information is complemented by material from 12 semi-structured interviews with key informants (i.e., local mayors and business associations in the Pyrenees). In both cases – immigrants and key informants –, the interviews had an average length of approximately one hour and they were carried out at the time and place of the interviewee's choice. All the interviews were recorded and fully transcribed. Finally, participants were assured that the collected data would be anonymized.

Interview data were analysed through a content analysis method. This has several phases. First, the codes were defined and

classified, according to the interview sections. Second, using free MAXQDA software, the interviews were labelled, and extracts were grouped into different topics. Finally, a systematic reading and analysis of this information enabled abstracting and the selection of relevant quotations to illustrate the main lines of analysis.

### **Mobility and migration patterns in rural Spanish Pyrenees**

A change in lifestyle comes to the forefront of many of the interviewees' narratives, as a

primary reason for immigration to the Pyrenees, in line with the lifestyle migration literature (e.g., BENSON, M. and O'REILLY, K. 2009; KORDEL, S. and POHLE, P. 2018). In a quest for a better way of life, immigration seems built upon “place idealisation” (BENSON, M. and OSBALDISTON, N. 2014) and preconceived images of the “idyllic rural” (HOGGART, K. and BULLER, H. 1995; BOYLE, P. and HALFACREE, K. 1998). Yet adjustment to a new life is not always an easy process since immigrants in rural Pyrenees occasionally lack an appropriate awareness of the territory and, for those in an entrepreneurial activity, a pertinent knowledge of how to do business in a rural setting. The following opinion reflects this duality – the interest in life changes and the difficulties of starting a new project in an unknown territory.

It was not easy to find a place for the campsite (...). We left everything behind in the Netherlands back in the 1990s, and our budget was limited. We wanted a small campsite, and this valley was just perfect. We had to practically rebuild the house and the idea of a small campsite was hard to implement. Rules are thought out for big facilities with many amenities, and this is an alternative campsite in a very small, remote place. It's hard to get here. If you want to get lost, you're in the right place. We are 100 percent sustainable (solar panels, waste) and our customers look forward to it (Jan<sup>2</sup>, Dutch male, 67, Girona).

Jan and his wife decided together to move to rural Catalonia – a radical change that involved leaving behind a stressful life in the Netherlands. For the majority of those contacted for the project, the migration decision process was not an individual act (in line with lifestyle migration) but rather the result of household considerations (see also KORDEL, S. and POHLE, P. 2018). This is also the case for the following interviewees who opted to migrate to Huesca, after years of working temporarily in the area as rafting instructors.

I arrived here to this village straight from Argentina. My first trip to Europe was here, because I am a rafting instructor. Rafting is my life. I came here with my boyfriend, now my husband, also a rafting instructor (...). I fell in love with the village because

of the mountains, the river. We came for eight years, only for the rafting season. We were entrepreneurs in Argentina. We made lifesaving vests for rafting (...). We had a severe personal problem in Argentina and we decided to settle here and replicate the business in Spain. My husband also has Italian nationality and that made things easier, but the whole business was not that easy. The rules are quite different (Alicia, Argentinian woman, 32, Huesca).

Alicia explained that her relationship with the study area began prior to the final decision to migrate, and a personal problem pushed her and her husband into changing their residence to a small town in the Pyrenees. This pattern is frequently found in the interviewees. For instance, Louis knew the municipality and the house to which he and his family moved, since it was his in-laws' second home. In this case, the COVID crisis pushed them into leaving Barcelona and immigrating into the Pyrenees.

I live in Cerdanya, but I could live anywhere. I work remotely for a French company as a self-employed worker. This is a solid business relationship. The reason why we live here? We ran away from Barcelona in the COVID times, and my wife's family has a house in (small town). In the future we want to buy our own house, and we will probably move to Southern France, which is cheaper (Louis, French male, 53, Girona).

Even if Louis said in interview “I could live anywhere”, the decision of moving into the Pyrenees implied family arrangements, such as children's schooling. As it can be seen in previous interview extracts, the migration decision was made by the family, regardless of the reason for moving to the Pyrenees (a personal problem, a change of life, COVID). Indeed, there are few individual labour migration trajectories in our non-representative survey (i.e., individuals immigrating into the area for purely labour-related reasons). Work usually comes after the decision to migrate into the area is made. In any case, it does not seem that the employed interviewees have struggled for jobs in the Pyrenees. This is the case of Xóchitl, a Mexican national, who took the decision to migrate into the Huesca Pyrenees because of his partner, even if this provoked downward labour mobility.

<sup>2</sup> All the names are pseudonyms.

I left everything for love (...). I started doing cleaning. I cleaned schools, I did cleaning for a company. I got to have up to four different jobs (...). I began to see what panorama I had, and I was told: "Here people are needed for caring old people". I studied the socio-sanitary course, which is offered by the county for free. Later, I joined a private company that specializes in providing care services in the area. They offered me a bad wage, not paying me extra time. It didn't suit me. I left it and, in June 2018, I started working in a private residence (Xóchitl, Mexican female, 50, Huesca).

A bottom line of all the interviews is housing. Since social life might be limited in rural areas, a private comfortable space for living is almost a necessity. Some interviewees argue that housing was the reason for them to live in a specific municipality/county. In other words, once the choice of the region is made (mountain areas/Pyrenees), the specific place becomes somehow irrelevant. Furthermore, housing is mentioned as the main problem in the area, which has a systemic lack of apartments for rent, due to the great competition from tourist activities and second homes in the housing market. This is especially true in the ski season and the high summer season. As one interviewed mayor said to us: "We just need a better train connection and more public housing. That's it".

Several general points emerge from the interviews. The first relates to lifestyle immigration, which is not only triggered by the desire to escape the fast pace of urban life but also represents a search for self-realization and a change in the way of life (BENSON, M. and O'REILLY, K. 2016). The narratives introduce the idea of well-being and nature as important elements for interviewees living in the Pyrenees. They generally appreciated the advantages of residing in a rural setting and no-one mentioned a possibility of moving out of the region soon. The second point is the complexity of patterns of mobility/migration in the area. Some of the interviewees were already living in Spain and moved into the Pyrenees for various reasons (e.g., tranquillity, house availability, COVID), and others immigrated straight from outside Spain to the area, as their first destination in the country. In both cases, they might have

known the region as tourists before settling there. In relation to this, the third point is that international migration into the Pyrenees is a household decision. Few interviewees decided to embark on the mountain adventure on their own. Most of them took this initiative either jointly with her/his partner or due to a Spanish spouse (or relatives) originally from the area (see also KORDEL, S. and POHLE, P. 2018). The fourth point is the housing market, which is a real problem in the area (and specially for immigrant workers) because of the intense competition derived from tourism activities and second homes. In any case, the specific choice of a municipality generally depends on the availability of affordable houses for international immigrants. Finally, labour markets in rural areas of the Spanish Pyrenees are dynamic, with a high demand for employees in different economic sectors and a large potential for possible entrepreneurs to create business. In this regard, some interviewees see the potential directly connected to landscape and mountain activities and show a special sensibility to environmental issues (see also CARSON, D.A. *et al.* 2018; MATTSSON, K.T. and CASSEL, S.H. 2019). This will be developed in the next section.

### **Economic incorporation: immigrant entrepreneurship**

The last section analysed reasons for immigration into the Pyrenees and showed the diversity of migration patterns in the area. Here, we specifically focus on the entrepreneurship of the new residents, particularly their capacity for setting up and expanding businesses. The bottom line is that immigrant entrepreneurs might possess different types of capital (i.e., economic, human and social capitals) which may be an advantage in labour markets, compared to their local Spanish-born counterparts (see also Woods, M. 2016).

Most of the entrepreneurs and self-employed workers interviewed for this project in Spain were born in Central and Western Europe: in Girona, out of the 16 interviewees,

11 were employers and self-employed workers (9 Europeans and 2 Latin Americans), and in Huesca, out of 15, the 10 employers and self-employed workers were, in general, originally from other European countries (7 out of 10, with the 3 remaining originally from Latin America). This initially implies that the interviewees were strong financially on arrival, but, after analysing their narratives, *economic capital* does not play a relevant role in the survival of businesses. In fact, these tend to be family run, small in size and usually have no employees (see also HOEY, B. 2005; MÜLLER, D.K. and JANSSON, B. 2007; BENSON, M. and O'REILLY, K. 2009; CARSON, D.A. and CARSON, D.B. 2018). To illustrate this point, Lena, a young Dutch farm employer who decided to live in a small town in the Pyrenees with her partner, also Dutch, said in her interview:

We had few savings. The truth is we bought the lands and the house through crowdfunding (...). I also got public assistance for being a young employer. In the beginning, we didn't hire anyone. For the grape harvest, friends of ours came here and helped us in exchange for food and accommodation (...). Now the business is growing, and we are thinking of permanently hiring a worker to help us on the property (Lena, Dutch female, 32, Girona).

The following example comes from Michel, a retired Frenchman who inherited land from his family. He said in his interview that he was not interested in business itself but was committed to the recovery of a traditional crop (saffron) that had been abandoned in the region. Michel decided to leave France permanently and reside in a small village in the Huesca Pyrenees. "I could live on my pension, but the idea of the saffron, and the idea of teaching young farmers about it, seduced me. It is more of a romantic idea. I love this region. But the truth is that I lose money". This is line with previous lifestyle literature which stresses wellbeing rather than economic profitability in business (YEASMIN, N. 2016; CARSON, D.A. *et al.* 2018).

As regards *human capital*, all the interviewed entrepreneurs had a tertiary educa-

tion and they are fluent in several languages, which is a competitive advantage, particularly for those working in the education field (see also MENDOZA, C. *et al.* 2020). This was the case with the following British interviewee, who created an English academy in a rural town in the Girona Pyrenees.

I was employed in a language school in Figueres but the jobs were temporary (...). I had to look for another similar job which meant continuing to be an employee, and I thought that maybe it would be interesting to start my own business, to be self-employed, so I'd have more control over my work (...). I knew there were lots of children, a great demand for English classes, and so I decided to open the English academy (...). I don't think it's that easy to be self-employed in Spain. My impression was there were several obstacles to jump over rather than open doors (...). I didn't apply for any help from the government during the COVID crisis, because I didn't know how to get these funds. In fact, we received financial support from our families in Britain (Steve, British male, 44, Girona).

University education and previous training are crucial for understanding interviewees' professional success, but, in business terms, previous human capital is only partially helpful. The preceding interview extract mentioned the difficulties in creating the academy and the lack of knowledge about the COVID aids made available by the Spanish administration. In this regard, half of the employers and self-employed workers started a business for their first time in their lives in the Pyrenees (and the other half were usually involved in entrepreneurial activities not related to their previous experience, see also HOEY, B. 2005).

On the other hand, interviewees' human capital might lead to a special appreciation of landscape and nature, which, in turn, could translate into innovative products (see also CARSON, D.A. *et al.* 2016; MATTSSON, K.T. and CASSEL, S.H. 2019). The following example comes from Márcia, a Brazilian-born university professor who embark into theatre with her Spanish partner, after partially retiring. They are both self-employed workers and, with other foreign-born people, they recovered an abandoned village in the Huesca Pyrenees, as a collective project. In her words:

My husband is from the region. We had the idea of buying a house, also for being closer to his parents. He has been living outside Spain for many years. The idea was to come to live here when I retired in Brazil. We bought a ruined house; the whole village was abandoned (...). We built an open-air puppet theatre in the house. It is very cute, and there is a fantastic view of the mountains (...). Most of my neighbours are foreigners. There is a Dutch guy, a Japanese girl, a Mexican who lives here for only part of the year. There is a person from Paraguay, and me (Márcia, Brazilian female, 62, Huesca).

Finally, as for *social capital*, the strongest competitive advantage amongst immigrant entrepreneurs seems to be their capacity to create and expand social networks. The literature has long pointed out the relevance of networks from the country of origin for the creation of businesses by immigrants (e.g., STAM, E. 2010; CARSON, D.A. *et al.* 2016). For example, this was particularly relevant for Johanna, since her small campsite is mainly aimed at Dutch people, with publicity and marketing undertaken in the Netherlands.

This is a special campsite. It is not for everyone. It is for people who want to get total disconnection. You're in Nature (...). We have a very basic tapas bar for dinner, but this is basically do-it-yourself. The Dutch prefer this kind of campsite, and they are almost 90 percent of our customers (Johanna, Dutch female, 60, Girona).

Yet networks are not only based on international bonds, but also on networks drawn from local society: their social networks are built/expanded via an array of informal and formal channels, which may be enhanced by their status as "welcomed" foreigners in areas suffering from chronic problems of depopulation and economic stagnation (EIMERMAN, M. and KORDEL, S. 2018; MENDOZA, C. *et al.* 2020). This "positive stereotype" may have a clear impact for some immigrant entrepreneurs, as regards making relevant contacts within the local economy, particularly in areas with a long tradition of tourism. In this respect, for most interviewees, business, friendship and social life go hand in hand, and this is something to take into consideration when moving into (and

staying in) Spain, as seen in the literature on lifestyle immigrants (e.g., BENSON, M. and OSBALDISTON, N. 2014; ROMAGOSA, F. *et al.* 2020). The point to stress here is that interviewees use social networks and relationships not only to be successful in business but also to achieve lifestyle objectives.

## Conclusions

Our results show that patterns of international migration into the Pyrenees are diverse, in the sense that arrival into the mountain region might derive from a decision by immigrants already living in Spain and willing to move home to a more salubrious region, or they may immigrate straight from outside Spain, with the area as their first destination in the country. In both cases, new residents might have known the territory beforehand as tourists. Diversity is also seen in the variety of immigrants' incorporations into the labour market, from the health sector to cultural-oriented services. This points to very dynamic rural labour markets in the Pyrenees region. There is also a common pattern among the interviewees: immigration into the Pyrenees is a household decision, generally motivated by the desire to escape the fast pace of urban life, in a search for self-realization and a higher quality of life (see also BENSON, M. and O'REILLY, K. 2016; CARSON, D.A. *et al.* 2018; KORDEL, S. and POHLE, P. 2018).

We find also that the interviewed immigrant entrepreneurs – who are mainly highly skilled Northern and Central European immigrants – usually fit themselves into the economic sectors dominant in the area (farming and tourist-oriented activities). Their success partially relies on the variety of capital they possess, including human capital, and their capacities for creating local, regional, and transnational social networks (see also EIMERMAN, M. and KORDEL, S. 2018; MENDOZA, C. *et al.* 2020), even if their businesses are often reduced in both size and capital, without any employees in most

cases (see also BENSON, M. and O'REILLY, K. 2009). The interviews ultimately indicate that physically rooted social networks and relationships (and, more broadly, social incorporations) are not only key aspects for the development of businesses in the area but also provide a source of wellbeing.

Our results add new evidence to previous discussions on immigrant entrepreneurship and lifestyle immigration, from the viewpoint of rural mountain areas. The interviewed immigrant entrepreneurs occasionally play a key role in the creation and introduction of innovative products in very specific market niches that had been little explored in rural areas (see also YEASMIN, N. 2016; MUNKEJORD, M.C. 2017). The examples of Márcia (a Brazilian national working on cultural activities in a previously abandoned locality) and Michel (a retired French who has recovered the saffron production on a very scarcely inhabited hamlet) are good examples of this. Our study case clearly indicates that immigrants show sensitivity when it comes to valuing local, cultural and landscape resources, which, in fact, are sometimes the reason for their arrival in the "countryside" (see also BARTOŠ, M. *et al.* 2009; IVERSEN, I. and JACOBSEN, J.K.S. 2017). In this way, immigrants stimulate local economies, and help to strengthen values on sustainability, community and sense of place. Certainly, the initiatives of the interviewed immigrant entrepreneurs are translated into successful businesses (see also CARSON, D.A. *et al.* 2018; MATSSON, K.T. and CASSEL, S.H. 2019), but, in line with MÜLLER, D.K. and JANSSON, B. (2007), and CARSON, D.A. *et al.* (2016), their companies are often limited in both size and capital, and these circumstances generally produce only a slight impact on local economic development and job creation in the Pyrenees.

Our results suggest that the rural environment could become an innovative environment in which small businesses could eventually thrive (see also STATHOPOULOU, S. *et al.* 2004; GARCÍA MARCHANTE, J.S. *et al.* 2007). Yet, there are still questions to be answered

about the innovative aspects of companies created by immigrants, and certainly more research needs to be done in the region to explore the territory's capacity to develop business. In this regard, no substantial differences were observed between the two Spanish study regions of Girona and Huesca. When a comparison is made between regions of France and Spain, differences may be observed in immigrants' economic incorporation. This will be explored subsequently in the SURDIM project which also foresees conducting research in the French Pyrenees.

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