

## RESIDENCIAL MIGRATION AND URBAN SPRAWL IN THE SPANISH MEDITERRANEAN AREA

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### INTRODUCTION

The objective of this paper is to examine the massive retirement migration from Western and Northern Europe into Mediterranean Spain and to explore and discuss the effects of such migration on the huge expansion of urban sprawl in that part of Spain. Moreover, this paper discusses some of the economic, social and environmental drawbacks of urban development in Mediterranean Spain in recent years –a development mostly driven by sun-seeker migrants, favored by the Spanish government, and promoted by large construction companies, with foreign capital involved.

Thanks to the *fictitious* wealth created by the Spanish housing bubble Spain attracted over 5 million immigrants into its borders during the first decade of this century, which made it one of the European countries with a bigger ratio of immigrants (12.2% in 2010). Most of these 5 million expatriates coming into Spain were looking for better labor conditions and a better quality of life. However, around 8% of them did not come in search of work, but in order to spend their savings and pensions in a relaxing, warm, sunny spot, close to the sea and not very far (2-3 hours by plane) from their colder and rainier countries of origin. This kind of migrants have been called, depending on the author, *lifestyle* migrants, *amenity* migrants, *international retired* migrants or even *residential tourists*, in order to distinguish them from the *labor migrants*, those who came into Spain looking for better work conditions. It was especially during the global economic expansion of the beginning of the 21st century that these retired *lifestyle* migrants arrived *en masse* into Spain in order to live there. This International Retirement Migration (IRM) was triggered, as regards Spain, by a combination of causes: low-cost airlines, a remarkable progress in infrastructures, relatively low housing prices, and the global technological improvement. In 2012, there were almost 450,000 (older than 55) officially registered migrants, while in 1991 their number was less than 60,000.

It must be said that these Northern European lifestyle migrants have contributed to the change in land use in the Spanish Mediterranean area by stimulating the development of urban sprawl there, as they could afford a family home and tended to follow the urban

patterns of their countries of origin (mostly the United Kingdom, Germany, Scandinavia and the Benelux). If we analyze the use of artificial land during the last twenty years in Spain, we can see that urban land uses experienced a strong rise in this period, chiefly due to the Spanish housing bubble (1997-2007); and also that among urban land uses, it was urban sprawl that grew the most in those years.

## **BACKGROUND**

### **The Spanish Housing Bubble**

Between 1997 and 2007, economic growth in Spain was based on the construction and real estate sector. This Spanish housing boom reached its peak in 2006 (when more houses were built in Spain than the sum of those started in Italy, the UK and Germany) and can be explained by two main factors. The first is that Spain, as a member of the Euro zone since its creation in 1999, enjoyed the benefits of being part of a currency regarded as strong and safe. It was thus easy for Spanish banks and companies to get credit from abroad. The second is the approval in 1998 of a new Land Law which established that any non-protected piece of land could be built on. The conjunction of both factors led to considerable investment of private capital (both Spanish and foreign) in the housing sector, offering quick, substantial returns. Town councils began to promote urban expansion so as to use it as a source of revenue (via taxes). The lack of a proper regulatory framework allowed nonpublic developers to build as much as they wanted. Neither national nor regional authorities were able, or willing, to control this development promoted by municipalities and private interests, or to attenuate its impact on environmental sustainability.

Because of land speculation, the average housing price multiplied by three between 1997 and 2007. That led to a growing housing bubble that eventually burst in the 2007 global financial crisis. The credit lines were cut, causing the collapse of the construction-dependent economy. Since then, housing price has fallen in Spain by a third and housing construction has descended to levels of the early 1960's.

### **Urban Sprawl Expansion in Spain**

Urban sprawl is a pattern of low-density settlement which has been the prevailing urban development pattern in Spain for the last 20 years. It was developed in the USA particularly after the Second World War. Then it spread to the northern European countries (by the 1960's); later it reached France (by the 1970's), and finally it affected Spain, Italy and other southern countries. Those who support urban sprawl believe that living in a suburban area increases contact with nature and reduces traffic congestion and air pollution. Furthermore, they argue that suburban houses are cheaper than those closer to the city center and that, when asked, most people prefer to live away from the compact city. Opponents of urban sprawl regard it as undesirable since it devours a huge amount of valuable land resources (including farmland and wetlands) and devastates landscapes. Moreover, it consumes unsustainable amounts of energy and water. Its dependence on the use of private vehicles causes not only air pollution but also traffic congestion, obesity

and stress for drivers. Besides, it destroys community life and segregates people according to their status.

## **CONNECTION BETWEEN LIFESTYLE MIGRANTS AND URBAN SPRAWL IN SPAIN**

### **Lifestyle migrants in Mediterranean Spain**

In Spain there is a noteworthy proportion of immigrants coming from countries with a higher GDP *per capita* than Spain: in 2012 there were more than 1,100,000 registered. Among those coming from the United Kingdom, Germany, Switzerland, Austria, the Benelux or Scandinavia, most of them are retired *lifestyle* migrants. It must be said that the number of these kind of migrants (people over 55 coming from richer countries than Spain) increased by 7.5 times between 1991 (60,000) and 2012 (450,000). A vast majority of them (95%) chose the Spanish Mediterranean regions (Costa Blanca, Costa del Sol, the Balearic Islands...) or the Canary Islands (which have a Mediterranean climate) to spend their retirement years, in search not only of sunny, dry weather, but also of a different lifestyle. Moreover, among the causes for these lifestyle migrants to come, it must be taken into account the role of the Spanish and foreign promoters, and also of the Spanish political authorities, in supporting mass tourism and attracting the attention of potential buyers abroad to the Spanish coastal areas.

### **The Contribution of Lifestyle Migrants to Urban Sprawl**

There is an obvious connection in Spain between the number of lifestyle migrants in a given territory and the amount of hectares of urban sprawl that can be found there. After Madrid and Barcelona, the highest rates of urban sprawl can be found mainly in tourist coastal provinces, such as Alacant/Alicante (Costa Blanca), Málaga (Costa del Sol) or the Balearic and the Canary Islands.

When they lived in their countries of origin, most lifestyle migrants now residing in Spain did so in single-family houses, i.e. under a model of urban development that could be characterized as urban sprawl. Apart from the new lifestyle, the better qualities of life or the 3,000 sun hours per year (1,500 in their home countries), lifestyle migrants were attracted to the Spanish Mediterranean area because of the price of single-family houses there. The cost of such a home was relatively low in the Spanish Mediterranean region, even after the price rise during the Spanish housing bubble. Therefore, a growing number of single-family houses have been built in the Spanish Mediterranean coast in recent years thanks to the solvent demand for them by an increasing amount of retired lifestyle migrants, a fact which has contributed to a huge urban sprawl development in that region.

Thus, with the approval of local authorities, real estate developers promoted and constructed thousands of single-family (detached or attached) houses in the Spanish Mediterranean coast. With this development came those drawbacks that are usually connected to urban sprawl: landscape and environmental damage, traffic congestion, flood risk, water scarcity... Unlike the part of Europe which lies north of latitude 45°, in the Mediterranean

basin rainfall is low and there is a chronic shortage of water, a fact which is exacerbated by urban sprawl expansion.

### **Social and Economic effects of Lifestyle migration into Mediterranean Spain**

Among the advantageous effects of this migration we can say that retired migrants increase the demand for local services, thus attracting new labor, which will increase the number of consumers even more. Another benefit is that retirees have incomes based largely on pensions, which are independent of local economy, and recession-proof.

Among the disadvantages of retirement migration we can mention overpopulation, overdevelopment, infrastructure congestion (roads, water, power, sanitation) and a devastating loss of the natural environment. Another drawback is that, even though retired migrants tend to be in good health when they move to their new home, as they age they become increasingly disabled, and this can collapse the local health care infrastructure. As regards social consequences, this urban overdevelopment has created huge suburban areas isolated from the urban centers, with little or no public transportation. Isolation and the distance to basic services –such as health centers or police stations– increase the perception of insecurity in these suburban areas.

### **CONCLUSIONS**

The Spanish Mediterranean region has seen an uncontrolled urban sprawl development during the last two decades. This growth was significantly driven by the solvent demand by lifestyle sun-seeker migrants, mostly retired from Northern Europe, who wanted –and were able to afford– a house that would allow them to live in the relaxing Mediterranean atmosphere.

This massive influx of lifestyle migrants created a considerable short-term wealth in Spain. First, it generated revenues for (local, regional, national) governments via taxes. Second, it benefited the private developers, and also the local people who provided services for the newcomers. Nonetheless, the lack of a suitable urban planning that would have made it possible to control the developers' excesses led to the construction of overcrowded suburban areas. Thus, many of those migrants who had moved south expecting to improve their quality of life –among other things, by living surrounded by nature and tranquility– eventually saw themselves (partly) frustrated as their new neighborhoods became too developed. Another consequence of this overcrowding has been the irreversible damage caused to the environment and the landscape through the loss of fields, mountains, and forests.

The economic progress that urban sprawl development generated in the short term can have unpredictable economic consequences in the long term. Some suburban areas have become overcrowded, and many drawbacks derive from this process of densification in the Spanish Mediterranean region. Given the growing shortcomings of the overcrowded Spanish Mediterranean coast, the retired lifestyle migrants now living there may not have replacement within a few years.