



Blandine Camus is the communication and policy officer at Euromontana, the European association of mountain areas

Peak time: Why Europe's mountainous regions need to mitigate the impact of an ageing population

Europe's rural areas are ageing faster than its urban areas. Mountain areas are no exception to this trend, where the demographic challenges are even greater.

According to the 2019 edition of Eurostat's Ageing Europe report, some of the regions with the highest share of older adults fall into this category. More than 30 per cent of the population in Evrytania, Greece's most mountainous prefecture, and Ourense, a heavily forested and mountainous province in Spain, is over the age of 65, while the European average currently sits at 21 per cent.

Why is this important?

Having a large ratio of older citizens is a particular challenge for mountainous regions, which can suffer from geographic isolation, a lack of basic services and fragmented health systems.

Many mountain areas have dealt with an ageing population for several decades, exacerbated by the out-migration of young people and the loss of territorial attractiveness, owing to a decline in public services and socio-economic dynamism.

But some regions are determined to adapt to and accommodate this demographic trend. As part of the European Union-funded SILVER SMEs project, the Spanish provinces of Burgos and Teruel have implemented measures to make their territories more friendly to older adults.

For example, the Society for the Development of the Province of Burgos launched funding calls to boost the "silver economy" – the name given to various goods and services designed to meet the needs of people over 50 – and encourage the creation of mobile services for seniors in rural areas. In total, 30 rural small and medium enterprises benefited from this funding in 2022.

The good news is these are not isolated initiatives. In fact, rarely has the EU paid so much attention to demographic issues. The appointment of a European Commissioner for

Democracy and Demography in 2019, a role that has since been entrusted to Dubravka Šuica, has raised the profile of demographic changes and trends, particularly in rural areas.

The European Commission's various statistics and reports on ageing and the impact of demographic change have helped raise awareness of the need to prepare for an increasingly ageing European society.

A Green Paper on Ageing also set out the policy basis for adapting our societies to longer life expectancies, taking into account territorial disparities in access to mobility, care and basic services. Interesting approaches were put forward, such as the promotion of intergenerational links and the silver economy.

Local initiatives such as those implemented in the SILVER SMEs project show the silver economy can be an opportunity to improve the quality of life of older adults while at the same time boosting local economies in mountainous regions.

Scaling up and replicating such initiatives, however, will require skilled professionals to work in these emerging businesses, the expansion of broadband internet to enable the use of some digital services, and an

influx of medical practitioners to provide quality care.

The challenges of ageing in the mountains are therefore inextricably linked to the broader issue of the attractiveness of rural living. The Commission has launched initiatives to revitalise rural territories, support regions in demographic transition and attract talent. But changing attitudes and enticing new residents will not happen overnight.

It is now up to territories to seize the available policy instruments, learn from the experiences of other regions and, most importantly, take an integrated approach to the challenges they are facing, from ageing populations to youth migration and territorial attractiveness. It's the only way to make rural Europe – particularly its mountain areas – resilient to demographic change. 🌱



An elderly man in Greece's Evrytania prefecture

"The challenges of ageing in the mountains are linked to the broader issue of the attractiveness of rural living"