

URBAN DECLINE AND FAILED RECONVERSION PROCESS: THE ROLE OF "PATH DEPENDENCE" AND GOVERNANCE THEORIES IN LOCAL ACTORS' STRATEGIES. THE CASE OF LANGREO (SPAIN)

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ABSTRACT - During the sixties and the seventies, most of the European cities suffered an economic crisis and an urban restructuring process, particularly the traditional industrial cities and regions. These places suffered a deep slow-down in their growth and a decline process. In Spain, Asturias is one of the most affected regions by the crisis, and the Asturian cities specialized in the mining activity and the traditional industry (Avilés, Gijón, Langreo and Mieres) entered a process of decline in the sixties that in some cases continues today. In Langreo, the strong reindustrialisation policy developed by the local actors has not contributed to modify the image of "industrial city". Today, the important presence of the industry in Langreo is paradoxical, when services are the economic driving force of the city and its principal source of employment. The lack of urban planning has given rise to a deteriorated urban landscape, where people do not wish to live today because of the proximity of industrial activities and the troubles that in some ways they cause. This paper analyses the unsuccessful process of urban and economic renovation as well as the current situation of Langreo. In order to do this, it uses a methodology that combines statistical information with interviews with local actors involved in the city's development. The main results are: (i) A critical analysis of the situation of Langreo and its future perspectives, (ii) A summary of the contrast between the different models proposed by the local actors for the city and (iii) Some conclusions about the importance of executing an urban organization to fit the economic and employment parameters with the physical and territorial conditions of the city. Some issues like the different intensity in the implication of local agents, or the mechanism that govern the alliances between them also stand out.

Keywords: governance, path dependence, shrinking city, urban project, Spain

INTRODUCTION

Since the 1960s, and especially during the following decade, the process of urban and economic decline became generalised as a consequence of the economic crisis. Thus, cities that for decades had been increasing in population and had been a source of jobs for their surrounding areas, entered in crisis, which in some cases has persisted until the present day.

Certain studies refer to "urban life cycle" theories with different stages of growth and decline related to outsourcing and cities' loss of dynamism in favour of outlying areas (Van der Berg *et al.*, 1982; Hall, 1987; Champion, 1989). However, these perspectives were overtaken by a reality that was much more complex.

Later, a series of perspectives that placed the emphasis on a combination of external structural factors (related to general economic cycles) with causes inherent to the cities themselves were defended. There, the interaction between local factors with these general processes had different repercussions in each case, despite sharing a series of common features. These perspectives proposed harmonising the Regulation Theory with other perspectives of a local nature (urban regime theory,

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local development theory, etc) to create an explanatory field that was valid for interpreting general dynamics without overlooking the particulars of each city as Lauria (1997) or Gómez (2008).

In any case, these general processes of decline affected only localised pockets of Spain, a country that experienced industrialisation later than other European countries. Nevertheless, certain regions (Basque Country, Catalonia, Asturias, Valencia, Southern Madrid), which contained zones that were highly specialised in mature industries, suffered the blows of the crisis as the examples studied by Sánchez *et al.* (2009).

Asturias is the Spanish region possibly most affected by the economic crisis, given that some of the most affected sectors (steel works, the mining and shipbuilding industries) had great weight in the region. Amongst Asturian cities, Oviedo and Gijón were undoubtedly the least affected by the reconversion. The former due to its larger size, the relatively lesser importance of industry in its local economy, and its traditional specialisation as a centre of regional services, avoided prolonged stagnation. Gijón, in turn, consistent with an intense renewal process, its economic importance and its relative diversification, was able to rapidly recover its momentum as the economic motor of Asturias.

As a result, Avilés, Langreo and Mieres were the cities most affected by the crisis. After several decades of decline, Avilés undertook an ambitious project that combined its strengths (port, well preserved historical centre, international companies) with the search for new opportunities based on the ambitious model of new urban centrality and city marketing addressed in the “Innovation Island” and the Oscar Niemeyer Cultural Centre projects. Nevertheless, Langreo and Mieres, cities located in the Asturian Coalfields, were incapable of generating a truly alternative vision of the city or of reversing their urban decline, losing population decade after decade and seeing their traditional roles within the Asturian urban system progressively reduced.

This report, following an approach to the concept of urban decline, analyzes this process and the failed revitalisation strategies in the case of Langreo. There, the lack of land and the conflicts between actors have been relevant. In order to do this, an analytical-interpretative focus has been used which combines bibliographic information, statistical data and in-depth interviews with the main actors in the development of the city. The result is a critical analysis of the revitalisation process in Langreo, and a series of conclusions about how it could reorient itself to promote effective change in the city’s overall project and in its demographic, economic and social recovery.

In this sense, the first section explains the theoretical framework of this paper, based on the evolution in the interpretation of the concept of “shrinking city” and in developing a methodological approach for analysing this kind of cities. The second section describes the crisis process in Langreo, caused by the collapse of its main industries. After this, the third and fourth parts explore the policies developed in the city in order to cope with the crisis. Finally, the fifth section analyses the current perspectives in Langreo, its continued decline, through the use of different statistical indicators and a total of 13 interviews with local actors. The paper finishes with an interpretation of Langreo’s failed revitalization process as conclusions.

URBAN DECLINE: BRIEF SUMMARY OF THE CONCEPT AND METHODOLOGICAL PROPOSAL

Urban decline can be defined as a process in which demographic and economic dynamism diminishes in a city, generally accompanied by changes in urban morphology (appearance of abandoned housing and factories or degraded zones) and in the social sphere (malaise, pessimism, negative city image), that can influence the role of the city in its regional context (reduction of its centrality).

This urban decline can manifest itself demographically in a loss of inhabitants, a negative migratory balance and the ageing of the population. Economically, the sharp structural change entailed in any collapse of the driving economies, along with a reduction in total employment and an increase in the unemployment rate represent some of the symptoms of this urban decline. At the same time, the increase in the number of abandoned homes and demolished spaces, and even of a drop or less dynamism in housing prices, also demonstrate this process.

Although there have been cities in decline throughout history, as Oswalt and Rieniets (2006) emphasize, decline has manifested itself in different forms, according to the historical, economic, social, technical or regional context. In developed countries today, the processes of urban decline due to natural or wartime disasters have declined enormously, making socio-economic causes the predominant reason for them.

In this sense, the current global context imposes a new framework for cities in general, but particularly for cities in decline (Pallagst *et al.*, 2009), called "Shrinking cities" by Oswalt (2005). Thus the classic differentiation of Benko and Lipietz (1992) between winning and losing zones emerges, imposing a competitive logic between cities, in which some of them reinforce their position while others become secondary zones, often affected by these urban decline processes, now accelerated by the improvement in physical and virtual infrastructures. Nevertheless, today there are very diverse studies of shrinking cities, this often being an open concept that serves as an umbrella for issues like the processes of suburbanisation, industrial decline, post-communist transition, and the loss of centrality of small and medium-sized cities. Therefore, it becomes necessary to establish a typology of zones that today can be considered to be in decline, as well as a methodology with which to approach them.

In connection with the typology of shrinkage, Fol and Cunningham-Sabot (2010) have presented the first results about the different characteristics of declining cities. In the present paper, the typology of shrinking city analyzed is "old-industrialized cities". In this sense, the seventies supposed a moment of the greatest change from the economic production point of view. The crisis of the Fordism, that had displayed some symptoms of exhaustion in the past, brought about a total rethinking of the current production model. These events were more relevant in regions specialized in mature industries as mining, steel industry, textile industry or shipbuilding, affected by competitive problems faced by the new industrial countries, with lower production costs.

These cities had an inherited structure which would make its adaptation to the new production model difficult. The existence of big public labour intensive enterprises, the low economic diversification, the environmental problems, or even the importance of trade unions and a conflictive labour force, creates disincentives to the efforts of recuperating these cities. In such a way, in the seventies the typology of old-industrialized city emerged, with several problems in order to cope with the crisis as stressed by Fothergill *et al.* (1988).

In the study of these cities, due to the different impact of the crisis on them, and also to the unequal capacity for the revitalization, structural perspectives have been superseded. Now, more importance is given to the local elements as explicative keys of the differences between cities, (Martin and Sunley, 2006). In the case of old-industrialized cities, the weight of economic, social, cultural or political inherited inertia is very important. This inertia continues to have an influence over the current situation of the cities, making its adaptation in the new context more difficult, as Simmie and Carpenter (2008) have manifested through the concept of "path dependence" and its application to revitalization policies (Röhring and Gailing, 2011).

In this context, the perspectives that emphasize the importance of the local scale have proliferated. A large number of publications stressed the role of local actors in the territory to generate innovations, as, for example, Gumuchian *et al.* (2003) or Camagni and Maillat (2006) pointed out. Territories are seen as active agents in their own development process, with an uneven capacity to develop external networks and to create positive dynamics. These perspectives have been evolving for more than thirty years focusing progressively their interest on the territory. In this sense, concepts like "learning regions" (Morgan, 1997) or "dynamics of proximity" (Torre and Rallet, 2005, and Torre, 2009) are very representative for this evolution.

Inside this perspective, some recent works, as Méndez, *dir.* (2010), have interpreted these subjects in a synthetic way, proposing several causes. First, the capacity of the distinct local agents is considered, albeit from the public sector angle, business ambit or civil society, to promote globalisation response strategies from within their own city, regardless of size or territorial location. This implies the effective use of its specific resources, constructed over time, among which human, cultural, social and intellectual capital are gaining importance over material assets. In this context, the

leadership capacities of local governments are considered strategic, in terms of promoting initiatives, managing them and unify different interests around a city project.

Table 1. Draft selection of urban indicators

<p>DEMOGRAPHIC INDICATORS Growth rates of population and population density Age structure and demographic aging Evolution of the natural growth of population (balance of birth-rate and mortality) Current migratory balance Evolution of the number of students enrolled in compulsory education levels over total population</p>
<p>ECONOMIC INDICATORS Evolution of local employment Evolution of unemployment Evolution of main industrial clusters of the city (pulling sectors) Evolution of construction of housing Evolution of land prices</p>
<p>SOCIAL INDICATORS Evolution of the average income per inhabitant Evolution of education of population Evolution of social and health equipments and personnel Evolution of housing prices</p>

Source: The author

Another fundamental factor is the ability of the companies established in the territory to form relatively stable formal and informal cooperation networks. These help transmit information and knowledge, particularly implied knowledge, sharing projects and generating various types of external effects, as Storper and Venables emphasize (2004). We must also discuss the institutional framework and the existence of cooperative and multi-level social networks between public and private agents able to create effective regional governance and manage a more participative planning that generates collective learning (Zanon, 2010). This is based on a negotiated power through shared responsibility, eliminating rigid government models in favour of collective interests, and on establishing values, regulations and organisations that promote initiative, partnerships and agreement. Therefore, an adequate institutional framework could become a catalyst for development. It would heighten contact between local agents and promote trustworthy relationships, essential to governing in ways which accumulate resources and lend collective decisions the highest degree of legitimacy, as Kooiman (2003) proposes.

Concerning the methodological approach, we propose an analytical-interpretative focus, combining the use of a series of statistical data that refer to the city situation with the use of qualitative techniques such as in-depth interviews of key actors (local and supra-local) in the region. The quantitative analysis can contribute to a set of demographic, economic and social indicators (Table 1) that address the reality and dynamism of the city, adapted to the needs of each zone and the availability of statistical data. For the qualitative analysis, we propose the creation of a network of standard actors

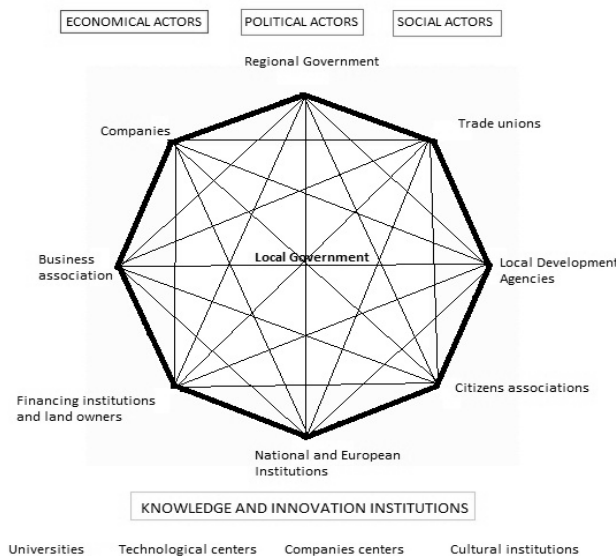


Figure 1. Stakeholder networks involved in territorial development

Source: Adapted from Alonso, J. L. and Méndez, R. (2000)

(Figure 1) that can be adapted to the reality of each region. Both are applied below to the Langreo (Asturias) case study.

PROCESS OF DECLINE IN THE CITY OF LANGREO, ASTURIAS

Langreo is located 14 miles South of Oviedo, the region’s administrative capital, and 20 miles South of Gijón, the main economic centre of Asturias. It is connected to both through a modern network of highways, which have solved the traditional problems of regional coordination that existed previously between the mining valleys of the interior and the coastal and pre-coastal zones.

This city was configured as such at the end of the 19th century in line with a boom in industrial activity (the steel industry) and mining (coal). The city began to grow on top of what had been a group of dispersed villages dedicated to ranching and agriculture in the valley.

Its location has traditionally generated problems of land scarcity, coexistence of industrial and residential activities and traffic flow, which have not been resolved by dismantling the factories and mines.

Since the sixties, Langreo has suffered from a mining and industrial crisis due to the marginal profitability of its operations, which make them incompatible with the new situation of economic openness that Spain is experiencing after two decades of autarchy. Also, this was caused by the obsolescence of its steelworks, which cannot compete with the large, modern factories of Gijón and Avilés located on the coast. Finally, the oil crisis of 1973, which was added to these issues, contributed to the dismantling of the city’s main activities.

This represented a rupture with Langreo’s continuous population growth over the course of the 20th century. In this context, Langreo had a population of 65,800 in 1960, which has dropped to 45,565 in 2009, representing a loss of 30% of its forces in the last 40 years (figure 3). At the same time, the demographic decline comes on top of the ageing of the population, although this is a generalised process in the region overall. In any case, over one fifth of the population of Langreo is over 65, while only 11% is under 16 years of age, which puts the dependency index of these economically inactive groups at almost 50%.

Between 1960 and 1983, Langreo witnessed the dismantling of its large steel working companies and the transfer of a large portion of its workers to other, more modern, factories. In parallel, its mining operations were also closing progressively based on a series of Business Plans, with the result that there are currently only three active mining pits and barely 750 workers compared to the 21,000 that were working in the entire valley at the end of the 1950s.

These closures also affected other activities that depended on the mining and steel industries: the chemical companies and the small and medium-sized metal processing workshops, which had to

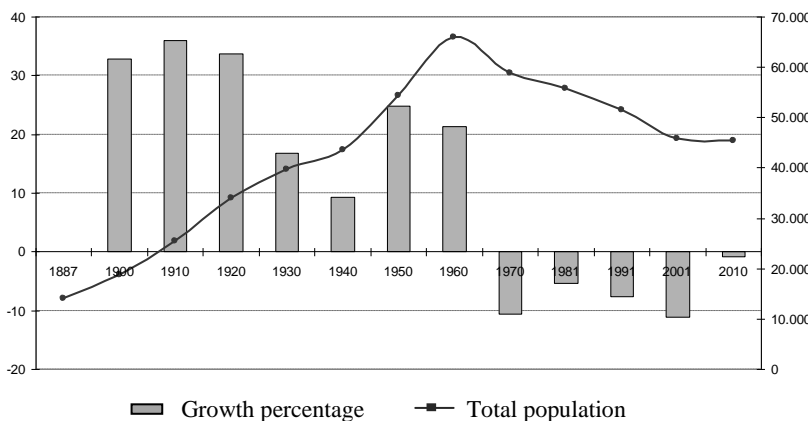


Figure 2. Evolution of the population of Langreo and intercensal growth (1887-2006)

Source: Census of Population and Housing and the Municipal Register

close due to the dragging effect of the dismantling of the large state concerns. Finally, the little local commerce that had existed (only 14.7% of the population was dedicated to the service sector in 1960) was affected by the loss of jobs and the resulting massive emigration of workers and young people.

The rapid and steep decline in economic activity and its consequences left Langreo in an extremely delicate situation which required it to confront urban, economic and demographic revitalisation in a very

unfavourable regional (crisis in Asturian industry) and generalised (economic crisis and political transition in Spain) context.

THE FAILURE OF THE MODEL ADVANCED FOR THE REVITALISATION OF LANGREO (1983-1987)

For decades, the continuous growth of industry and population in Langreo, within such a limited space as the bottom of a valley, resulted in an ungainly industrial city where different land uses side by side were common, generating problems of pollution, health, noise, visual impacts and lack of green space (Figure 3). Nevertheless, in 1983, after practically all of the large companies closed, the Langreo City Hall had the opportunity to promote an urban and sectoral change in the city that also protected the main components of its industrial and mining heritage. The latter was not done in cities like Gijón and Avilés, which today do not preserve any trace of their industrial heritage. In Langreo,



Figure 3. *Proximity of industry and city in Langreo*

Source: Urban Catalogue of the Special Recovery Plan for the HUNOSA lands in the Coalfields

the protection of different industrial elements has permitted their subsequent reuse as museums, business and professional training centres, etc., demonstrating the appropriateness of the decision to preserve them at that time.

The purchase by the Langreo City Hall of the lands occupied by the main steelworks, and a series of agreements with the Principality of Asturias permitted the creation in 1987 of Valnalón, first as an industrial park and later as a technological park, with a Business Centre inaugurated in 1989 and an industrial park the following year. These actions

represented in their day the start of the first business centre in Asturias, as well as the beginning of a new concept for productive activities based on issues linked to innovation, technology and training.

During this period, a new General Urban Land Use Plan was implemented in 1984. This led, as the previous actions in the productive environment did, to a break with the “19th century industrial” city model which existed in Langreo at the time. The Plan’s priorities, on the one hand, were the organisation of land use in Langreo, separating industry and housing, and undertaking the arduous task of making Langreo into an inhabitable city for its residents, with projects such as the clean-up of the polluted Nalón river and the creation of industrial parks outside the urban core to house the remaining industry inside the city. At the same time, the second great axis of the Plan was the aforementioned protection of the industrial heritage and the commitment to selective industrialisation, which would direct the economy in a more determined fashion towards the tertiary sector, such that the interlinking of industry and services was strengthened, as emphasizes Fernández García (2004).

Nevertheless, in the 1980s, the decline of employment in Langreo was unstoppable. Together with continued business closings, this was the decade in which the most severe reconversion policies of the Spanish government were developed, which also affected industry in Langreo. Confronted with this situation, the pressure from trade unions to generate new jobs linked to industry was much stronger than the City Hall’s proposals to initiate economic restructuring towards the tertiary sector, resulting in a change of mayor in 1987 due to the disagreements between local powers.

THE TURN TOWARDS A REINDUSTRIALISATION MODEL AND THE FAILURE OF REVITALISATION POLICIES (1987-2010)

After 1987, different actions intended mainly to create industrial zones were taken, giving rise to a total of 11 industrial parks in Langreo. Despite this, the secondary market was incapable of replacing the previous employment and economic change was unstoppable. Between 1991 and 2001, industrial employment in the city was surpassed definitively by that of the service sector, such that the symptoms of change were now evident (Table 2).

Table 2. *Evolution of employment for activity sectors in Langreo (1991-2001)*

	1991	2001	Difference
Agriculture	54	116	62
Industry	6.538	3.572	-2,786
Building industry	1.393	1.912	519
Service sector	6.784	8.184	1.400
Total	14.769	13.964	-805

Source: Census of Population and Housing and the Municipal Register

At the end of the 1990s, like other mining cities in the country, Langreo became a recipient of Mining Subsidies created by the Ministry of Industry (1998-2005), and not long after it became the object of the reactivation program implemented by the Principality of Asturias (2001-2005). This assistance involved, among other things, the availability of additional funds for infrastructure projects and the roll-out of industrial parks, the financing of projects like the Steelworks Museum (MUSI) in Langreo, assistance to businesses to locate there, scholarships and training programs, etc.

On the other hand, in 1998, the public mining-sector company (HUNOSA) created the Asturian Society for Mining Diversification (SADIM - *Sociedad Asturiana de Diversificación Minera*) with two major divisions, one (Industrial Parks) having responsibility for implementing economic diversification projects in the Mining Counties of Asturias and committed to generating certain minimum employment quotas. In relation to this program, SADIM is now promoting and supporting private initiatives through minority shareholdings in the capital of companies proposed by the private sector, fomenting, as a result, the training of entrepreneurs.

The efforts of the Valnalón Business Centre seem to point in this direction, through courses to convey entrepreneurial values to students and through the training of young entrepreneurs at the Centre itself, which has a Project Seed bank and a Business Incubator, which is increasingly generating new businesses not only in Langreo, but also in the valley as a whole, and even beyond it, making it a national model.

In summary, since 1990 the processes of labour reconversion, mine closure and growing unemployment seem to be accelerating in parallel with the arrival of subsidies and the roll-out of initiatives that, while incapable of reversing the existing problems, are mitigating them and starting to support the socio-economic change that is increasingly evident in the valley.

Nevertheless, the existing political model continues to favour reindustrialisation as a path to revitalise the city, so that land uses remain tightly intertwined and the project of the city continues to be that of a major industrial city, when in reality services are the motor of the economy of Langreo. Therefore, there are two parallel processes at work at the moment: on the one hand, the changes taking place in Langreo are accelerating, while on the other, the inertia inherited from the past persists. This situation, on the whole, creates a situation in which a clear vision of the city is lacking as Prada stresses (2011).

At the same time, there is an acceleration of change, which is linked in part to the large subsidies Langreo receives, both from the National Government and from the Principality of Asturias. These represent funding for new infrastructure, industrial land and services, and for training programs and business subsidies. Thus, the changes in the city of Langreo are occurring increasingly rapidly with the creation of the Professional Training Centre, the Steelworks Museum and the New

Technology Centre. Projects to reconvert old mining zones to a geriatric centre, new sports facilities and a four-star hotel are being financed with mining subsidies.

Nevertheless, inertia also persists, which translates into projects oriented toward recovery or industrial zone creation that involve the continued mixing of industry and housing. These, together with the underutilisation of the mining-industrial heritage and other issues which are a source of conflict, such as the existence of a thermal power plant in the middle of the city, generate tensions between the two urban models for Langreo.

UNDERSTANDING THE CURRENT SITUATION OF LANGREO: SOME INDICATORS AND INTERVIEWS RESULTS

Below we outline an attempt to adapt the abovementioned indicators. The difficulty of obtaining and using some of these led us to select just thirteen demographic, social and economic indicators. In this sense, using table 2 it is possible to confirm the poorer performance of the city of Langreo with respect to the rest of Asturian cities. In this way, a pronounced drop in its population, a clearly negative demographic balance resulting from its inability to attract population to the same extent as the rest of the cities, and a higher rate of ageing, highlight Langreo's currently poorer demographic evolution.

With respect to the economic indicators, the poorer evolution of employment in the city of Langreo is clear, which translates into a higher unemployment rate. It is also interesting to note the greater specialisation of the workers in the metalworking industry with respect to the total number of industrial workers and the lower tax of new companies. Finally, the lesser increase in housing prices in Langreo demonstrates the lesser dynamism of the city compared to the rest of the urban centres in the region. Other social statistics confirm the poorest situation of the city with regards to the health personal disposition or the information technologies extension.

These data as a whole demonstrate the situation of decline being experienced by the city of Langreo and the most difficult revitalization process within Asturias. Nevertheless, to approach the reality of the region, as well as explain this situation, it is necessary to conduct both an evolutionary analysis of the Langreo's recent history and a qualitative analysis based on interviews with local actors.

Table 3. Available indicators for Langreo

Demographic indicators	Langreo	Asturian cities
Growth rates of population (1991-2009)	-11.88%	-0.24%
Tax of demographic aging (2009)	22.05	21.01
Evolution of natural growth of population/balance of birth-rate and mortality (2008)	-254	-1.522
Current migratory balance (2009)	162	6.616
Economic indicators	Langreo	Asturian cities
Evolution of local employment (1990-2006)	-16.38	1.78
Tax of unemployment (2006)	9.1	7.7
Evolution of main industrial clusters of the city (metallurgical branches/total industry)	43.8%	35.92%
Evolution of land prices (1995-2006)	38.6%	48.7%
New companies/1000 residents (2008)	1.23	1.67
Social indicators	Langreo	Asturian cities
Health personnel/1000 residents (2008)	10.31	14.23
Evolution of housing prices (1995-2006)	29.87%	37.59%
Percentage of participation in the local election process (2007)	55.0%	61.1%
High speed Internet connections/1000 residents (2008)	16.64%	21.72

Source: Own calculation

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With the intention of understanding the situation of the city and to look into this apparent distortion, we applied the qualitative methodology defined in the theoretical framework of this document. To do this, we defined a representative sample of local agents directly involved in different key aspects of the city. The objective was to discover their points of view on the current and future situation of Langreo, its strengths and weaknesses, as well as to identify possible elements of cooperation and conflict. As a result, 13 in-depth interviews were made with political, economic and social actors, after a process of searching, identifying and making contact with them. In this manner, different key questions related to the economy, society, governance and the mining-industrial heritage of Langreo were obtained. Next, we outline a summary of the main contributions of this fieldwork.

In general, social actors are more favourable to a deep change in the city, based on a different industrial policy (to reduce the presence of industrial companies in Langreo), a more severe urban ordering of the city, and to create a more habitable city. On the other hand, political actors and trade unions are more favourable to create as much employment as possible and to develop new industrial areas. With this, they have put the creation of new jobs before habitability and environmental questions. In general, most of the enterprises are in favour of the city council policy.

First, interviews showed that the metalworking sector and industry, generally speaking, have ceased to be the motor of the city. Also, today there is a strong policy for creating industrial zones in the context of a scarcity of available lands and, on many occasions, land prices are rising due to the steep slope terrain, and the reduced size of the industrial parks (Riaño III and La Moral are examples of this), an issue that makes it difficult to compete with other areas in the region where lands are flatter and better located.

Therefore, it is worth asking if it would not be better to try to attract industry that is organised and restricted toward sectors with added value and related to the service sector, which would not only create jobs for the metalworkers, but also for universities and technical institutes, which moreover consume less land.

The lack of political will in the City Hall for leading a change in the model of the city seems to be reflected in other aspects as well, such as its position with regard to the survival of the power plant inside the city (Figure 4), its weak environmental commitment (delays in the development of the environmental policy or the turnover in the environmental council). Thus, with respect to these



Figure 4. *General view of Langreo with the power plant*
Source: The author (2008)

conflict-generating issues, it would be more advisable to promote the debate to avoid confrontations between different local actors.

These subjects appear in the urban planning guidelines. The city council proposes a restructuring of the old-industrialized areas into new industrial spaces in order to attract more companies. In addition, social agents demand alternative uses (services, green areas, open spaces ...) to provide more environmental quality to the city.

On the other hand, the mining-industrial heritage today represents the main resource that is specific to Langreo. This is a rich, diverse and abundant heritage compared to that of other cities. Nevertheless, despite the classification as heritage sites, these are experiencing the dual process of abandonment and lack of proposals that raise the issue of management changes.

In summary, Langreo today presents two urban projects. The first, which can be considered “traditional”, is defended by political actors, enterprises and trade unions. It proposes the strengthening of the secondary sector and services in parallel, maintaining and creating as many industrial jobs as possible or creating new infrastructures for attracting businesses. Opposing this, other actors (social actors, associations, innovation centres) are committed to the “alternative” project based on favouring the service sector and moderating industrial growth, shedding the most polluting industries and betting on those with greater added value and organising the city more rigorously.

Both visions have, nevertheless, points in common and differences. Among the former, there is the need to promote regional forms of government, undertake urban improvements, and value the mining-industrial heritage and to create services that attract population. As for the latter, among the points of disagreement stand out the role of industry in the local economy, the position on the power plant, the role of the City Hall in society and the causes attributed to the demographic decline in the city. The problem of the “traditional” model is that it does not consider the regional context of Langreo, and therefore overlooks the evident lack of land, which does not allow the coexistence of different uses.

CONCLUSIONS

Langreo, as many other cities in Spain and Europe (Bilbao, Avilés, Saint-Etienne, Glasgow, etc.) suffered a deep crisis in the sixties and seventies. However, its specific nature lies on its incapacity to develop a successful revitalization policy as a consequence of the conflict between the local actors. As a result, Langreo is still currently declining and its future is not very promising. The principal causes of this are: (i) A reindustrialisation policy in a context of land shortage, (ii) A weak agreement between local agents in order to define the city project, (iii) A bad environmental management, which affects the image of the city, (iv) On a physical scale, the scarcity of land generates problems due to the close proximity of disparate uses, (v) The consequences of an inherited social environment in which the existing determinants (high number of retirees, little initiative, highly specialised labour, etc.) limit the opportunities for development and the possibilities for change in this situation.

As a result, Langreo is today an unattractive city, despite of its lower housing prices, in comparison with the principal cities of Asturias. The presence of the industries close to the residential areas and the low environmental quality are two important handicaps for the future of the city. The image Langreo has presented and should present in the future underlies the confluence of different projects and visions. Thus, while the mining and industrial tradition is very important in the rhetoric of certain actors who continue to defend this productive base for Langreo, for other actors it represents a remnant of the past. For the latter, the projects for the city must lean towards eliminating the image of Langreo as a degraded, socially conflictive and unattractive place.

In the future, Langreo should improve its deficits in order to cope with urban decline and to reverse its urban model. This process has been completed by other old-industrialized cities in North Spain (Bilbao, Avilés...), but in Langreo, it is an unresolved matter, as the city is incapable of revitalising itself, and enters the group of “loser cities”.

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