

# Planning to meet challenges in shrinking rural regions. Towards innovative approaches to local planning

AKSEL HAGEN, ULLA HIGDEM AND KJELL OVERVÅG



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In this article we ask to what extent is current demographic development reflected in the present planning and policy practice of shrinking municipalities; whether there is a focus on strategies and measures for population growth; and, finally, to what extent do politicians and planners think we should change the way we plan based on the expected demographic changes. Our study illustrates how challenging it is for shrinking municipalities to break with established practices and modes of policy development and to adopt a more sustainable position. The ‘stigma’ of shrinking (Sousa & Pinho 2015) is at odds with the ideals of the local politicians. However, we find that the response in planning and policy is not uniform: several responses may appear simultaneously and connected to different parts of the societal (master) development plans, thus, making the plans incoherent and contradictory. Hence, we contribute to Beetz, Huning and Plieninger’s (2008) and Hospers’ (2014) types of responses by adding this muddled or hybrid response, which might be labelled an ‘incoherent response’. Overall, we suggest that today’s planning practice in rural areas in Norway has neither dared nor wanted to adapt to the most likely developments of a shrinking population, *let alone* actually doing so openly and consistently. This reluctance has had critical and negative implications for these municipalities. Future research should develop theories, concepts and models for more suitable knowledge-based and innovative local planning that can meet this complex societal challenge.

Keywords: rural development, shrinking societies, realistic planning, innovation, innovative planning

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## Introduction

Norway’s population is increasing, but rural municipalities all over the country are undergoing depopulation. Of the most sparsely populated municipalities, 75% have had shrinking populations in the last 20 years, often with residents scattered over a large area. In 2019, 71% of all Norwegian municipalities experienced a decline. These demographic developments are expected to continue in

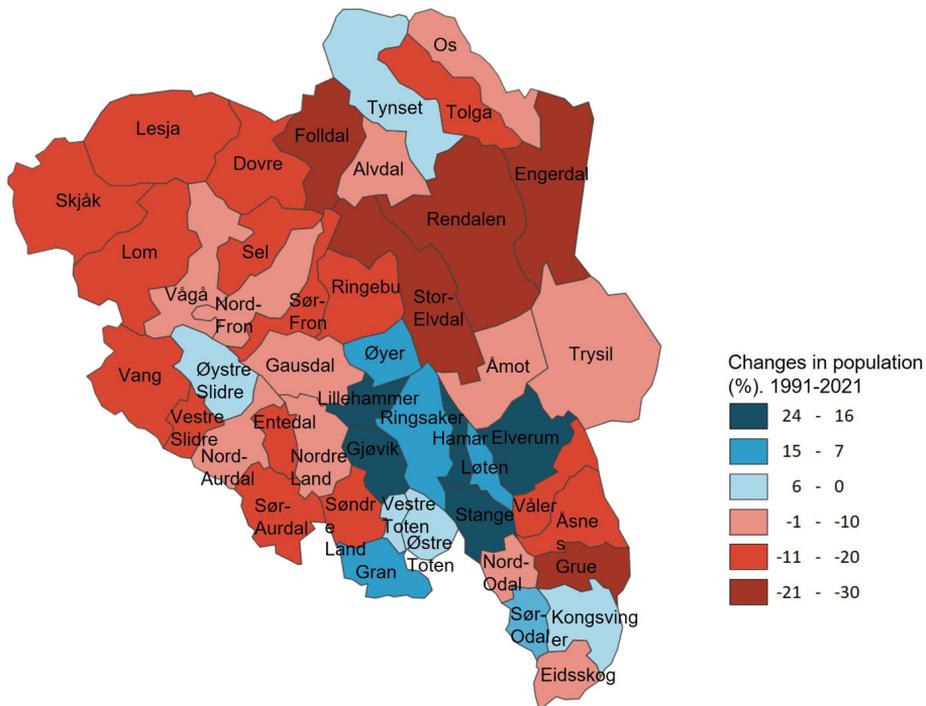
the coming decades (NOU 2020:15). Although policy-making and planning have long focused on counteracting these demographic trends, governmental studies show that only massive immigration or a sharp increase in fertility rates can alter this course (*ibid.*). For most municipalities, the likelihood of a reversal is very low, both currently and in the near future.

Innlandet County, which is the Norwegian case studied in this article, is one of the three most peripheral in Norway when it comes to permanent populations (together with the counties in northern Norway). Innlandet has a low density of population and large parts of the county are experiencing population decline. Of the 46 municipalities in Innlandet, 31 have had a population decline in the last 30 years (in the period 1991–2021), meaning that they have a lower population number in 2021 than in 1991. The decline varies considerably, from 30 to 1% (see Table 1). Some municipalities, especially in the eastern and northern parts of Innlandet (Fig. 1), have had an almost continual decline annually, while others have had some interspersed years with small increases in population numbers. The yearly fluctuations in population development are quite strongly influenced by the immigration of refugees to Norway, while the natural population change (births, deaths) has a more stable and declining trend.

**Table 1.** Population numbers and change in numbers and percentage (%) 1991–2021. Municipalities in Innlandet County and Innlandet. Sorted by %-change. (Source: Statistics Norway 2022).

Municipality	1991 (pop.nr)	2021 (pop.nr.)	Change (pop. nr)	Change (%)
Rendalen	2496	1741	-755	-30 %
Stor-Elvdal	3337	2378	-959	-29 %
Engerdal	1677	1250	-427	-25 %
Follidal	1989	1518	-471	-24 %
Grue	5774	4545	-1229	-21 %
Etnedal	1565	1257	-308	-20 %
Lesja	2454	1980	-474	-19 %
Våler	4408	3587	-821	-19 %
Dovre	3071	2512	-559	-18 %
Sør-Aurdal	3549	2904	-645	-18 %
Lom	2651	2204	-447	-17 %
Tolga	1877	1563	-314	-17 %
Vestre Slidre	2529	2120	-409	-16 %
Åsnes	8540	7227	-1313	-15 %
Skjåk	2574	2183	-391	-15 %
Ringebu	5182	4408	-774	-15 %
Sel	6381	5592	-789	-12 %
Sør-Fron	3493	3064	-429	-12 %
Vang	1784	1573	-211	-12 %
Søndre Land	6305	5579	-726	-12 %
Trysil	7316	6580	-736	-10 %
Vågå	3945	3564	-381	-10 %
Os	2032	1870	-162	-8 %
Nord-Fron	6167	5705	-462	-7 %
Gausdal	6448	6023	-425	-7 %
Nordre Land	7038	6581	-457	-6 %
Eidskog	6451	6099	-352	-5 %
Nord-Odal	5326	5038	-288	-5 %
Nord-Aurdal	6515	6360	-155	-2 %
Åmot	4422	4338	-84	-2 %

Municipality	1991 (pop.nr)	2021 (pop.nr.)	Change (pop. nr)	Change (%)
Alvdal	2430	2405	-25	-1 %
Vestre Toten	13358	13459	101	1 %
Kongsvinger	17464	17851	387	2 %
Tynset	5398	5537	139	3 %
Østre Toten	14314	14871	557	4 %
Øystre Slidre	3107	3236	129	4 %
Sør-Odal	7428	7914	486	7 %
Gran	12626	13611	985	8 %
Løten	7045	7625	580	8 %
Øyer	4586	5093	507	11 %
Ringsaker	31399	34897	3498	11 %
Gjøvik	26250	30395	4145	16 %
Stange	17645	21072	3427	19 %
Elverum	17406	21292	3886	22 %
Hamar	25454	31509	6055	24 %
Lillehammer	22889	28493	5604	24 %
<b>Innlandet</b>	<b>356095</b>	<b>370603</b>	<b>14508</b>	<b>4 %</b>



**Fig. 1.** Changes in population (%) in municipalities in Innlandet 1991–2021. (Source: Statistics Norway 2022).

The decline in population numbers is in the long run expected to continue. The age composition has changed and will keep changing towards a significantly older population. This situation has recently been discussed in the demography committee's report (NOU 2020:15). They argue that the political goals for these districts should not be based on growth, but instead to create good communities for those who live or run a business there.

Norway has a long tradition of research and policies on rural areas (e.g. Teigen 2000, 2019), including the local development, planning and development of rural services (Aasbrenn 1990; Bråtå *et al.* 2016). Already in 1990, Aasbrenn (1990, 6) termed the situation "the thinning-out society". However, no major research and development projects on local planning, including the role of politicians and political parties, in shrinking rural regions in Norway have been undertaken.

In the study that this paper draws from, we address three rarely asked questions in the literature on most rural municipalities. To what extent is current demographic development reflected in current planning and policy practice in Innlandet? Is there a focus on strategies and measures for population growth? To what extent do politicians and planners think we should change the way we plan based on the expected demographic changes?

The empirical basis for this discussion is data from an initial study of the situation in Innlandet County, Norway, financed by the Regional Research Fund Innlandet. The aim of the initial study is to gain a better understanding of today's planning practice for local and regional development in municipalities and counties, where shrinking is evident. This smaller study is part of the development of a national research and co-operation project to be financed, by local municipalities, the regional council and national and international research institutions. The discussions in this article relate to situations where the municipalities are experiencing a decline in the *permanent* population, that is, the numbers of persons who are registered in the national population register with their residential address in the respective municipalities. Several of the municipalities in Innlandet undergoing depopulation are simultaneously experiencing a high and increasing number of second homes, with owners leading a multi-house-home lifestyle. This can have significant impacts on the local communities and municipalities (Arnesen *et al.* 2012). However, for the municipalities the permanent populations are still crucial because they are the main criteria for the size of their budgets, due to the existing rules for taxation and income distribution to the municipalities in Norway. Thus, the focus in this paper is on permanent populations.

The structure of the paper is as follows: In Section 2, we address the theoretical perspectives of planning related to shrinking rural societies. We then present the case of Innlandet County, the planning context and the institutional framework for planning in Section 3. Next, we present our arguments for using qualitative mixed methods, and we provide an overview of the data in Section 4. This is followed by the discussion of the findings. Finally, we conclude by adding a fuzzier and hybrid adaptation strategy to the existing literature, and the need to develop theories, concepts and models for more suitable knowledge-based and innovative local planning in shrinking societies.

## Theoretical perspectives on shrinking

Beauregard (in Sousa & Pinho 2015) argues that shrinking is a 'stigma' that is at odds with the ideals of decision-makers. Further, they underline that current theories and policies may lead to the impression that societies are 'doomed' if their populations are not growing. In the literature, there is broad agreement that growth-oriented planning, which disregards the data and insists on unrealistic ideas about growth, has hindered the development of other proactive strategies for dealing with the decline (Lang 2012; Syssner 2020). Municipalities and municipal master planning thus fail to recognise the potential possibilities and alternative solutions arising from strategic local master planning with a holistic perspective and a focus on smart and sustainable shrinking. Therefore, current strategies, means and measures will often be irrelevant. Municipalities may waste scarce resources on unrealistic policies aimed at attracting new residents in competition with other municipalities, consequently disregarding alternatives recognising shrinkage (Sousa & Pinho 2015; Leick & Lang 2018; Syssner 2020).

'Shrinkage' has long been on the international research agenda, mostly with a focus on shrinking cities in North America and in parts of continental Europe (e.g. Gans 1975; Hollander *et al.* 2009). For

rural and peripheral areas, there has been a small but growing body of research on planning in shrinking regions. This research has partly been based on projects aiming to develop approaches for planning in shrinking regions, for example, in Germany (Küpper *et al.* 2018). What has been the reaction to shrinking in policies and planning? Beetz, Huning and Plieninger's (2008) study of north-eastern Germany's countryside revealed four diverging positions: 1) an opening up to alternative lifestyles, which accept a lower standard for quality of life as well as other decreasing welfare services; 2) improvement of competitiveness; 3) 'passive restructuring', which assumes that people will continue to out-migrate anyway; and 4) an emphasis that one must not give up the welfare system but keep it as an indispensable good, through support shared between strong and weak regions.

Hospers (2014) has, in a similar way, identified four policy responses to shrinking in Europe. He discusses urban shrinkage in general, but we find it relevant for our study: 1) trivialising, where shrinkage is overlooked and denied; 2) countering shrinkage, with policies directed at attracting new people and businesses to resolve the problem of shrinkage; 3) accepting shrinkage, adapting the content of policies to mitigate the effects of shrinkage, improving the quality of life for the current population; and 4) utilising shrinkage, where the approach confirms that quality of life does not necessarily depend on population density, and tries to take advantage of it. For rural areas in Northern Europe, Syssner (2020) finds that there is a general unwillingness among planners and politicians to face the consequences of shrinkage, which can be seen in connection to Hospers' (2014) response of 'trivializing' shrinkage in cities. In contrast, Sousa and Pinho (2015), discussing shrinking in Europe in general, find that the most common response in planning is to keep a strategy for economic growth with a goal of resuming population growth, like Beetz, Huning and Plieninger's (2008) 'improvement of competitiveness' and Hospers' (2014) 'countering shrinkage'. Sousa and Pinho (2015) say, furthermore, that this strategy normally fails, whereas both Hospers (2014) and Syssner (2020) state that it seems that an approach of acceptance and adaptation is the most suitable strategy to address shrinkage.

Our review of the research on shrinkage leads us to conclude that it has succeeded in revealing the challenges for planning in shrinking regions and contributed to increasing awareness of this issue, but it has also discovered a general unwillingness among planners and politicians to face the consequences of shrinkage. There have been some interesting contributions to new theoretical and practical approaches (e.g. papers from the special issue of *European Planning Studies* on 'Re-thinking non-core regions: Planning strategies and practice beyond growth' (Leick & Lang 2018). Nonetheless, the need for the further development of theories, concepts and models, as well as approaches to planning in shrinking regions, is pressing. Researchers such as Sousa and Pinho (2018) state that there is no theory on planning for shrinkage, and that the literature is unclear and confusing. This is particularly so for rural and peripheral regions (Syssner 2020).

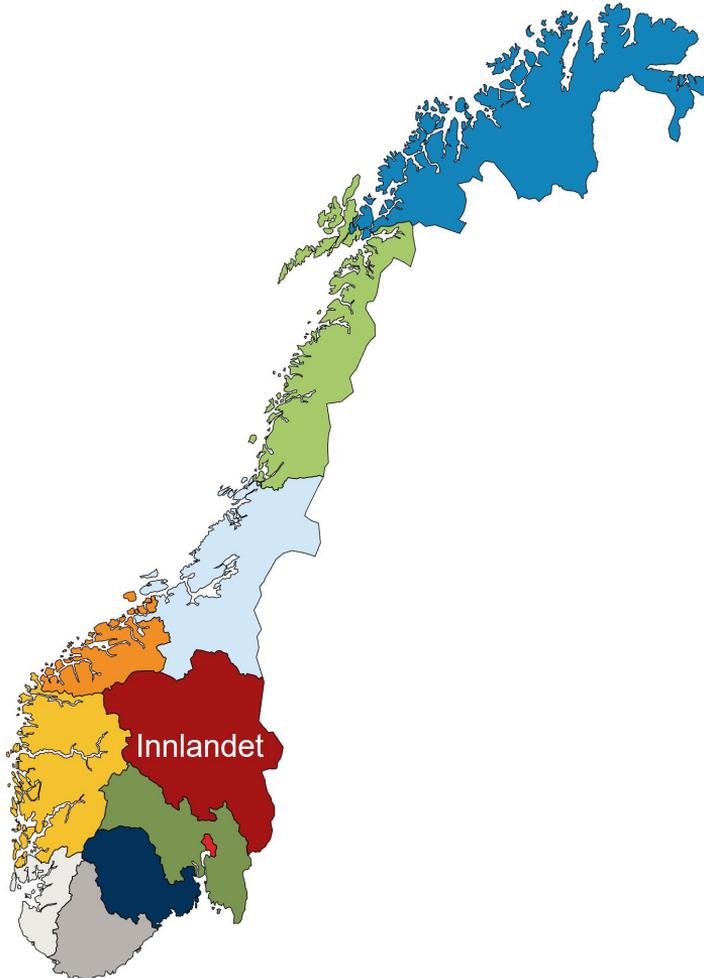
From the applied perspective, ESPON (2020, 31), for example, calls for "... practical guidance and support for local action, across a wide menu of interventions, [to] increase its potential for real changes", and that approaches for shrinking areas must be based on evidence and reflect an analysis of pathways to shrinkage. ESPON (2020, 31) emphasises the need for a policy for shrinking rural areas that "... reflect(s) broader societal objectives than economic growth, such as inclusion, spatial justice, and wellbeing, and support a Just Transition – towards a sustainable society". In Norway, this issue is highly relevant because local (municipal) planning is fundamental: the municipalities have extensive responsibilities within their territory, such as welfare services, education, infrastructure and societal development.

Hagen and Higdem (2019, 2020a) stress the need for innovation in planning, including policy development, to address the issues arising in shrinking rural societies. This also calls for innovation in planning processes, methods and models (Beetz *et al.* 2008), where co-creation between public, private, NGOs and other actors is vital for collaborative innovation (Torfing *et al.* 2016).

### *Case and planning context*

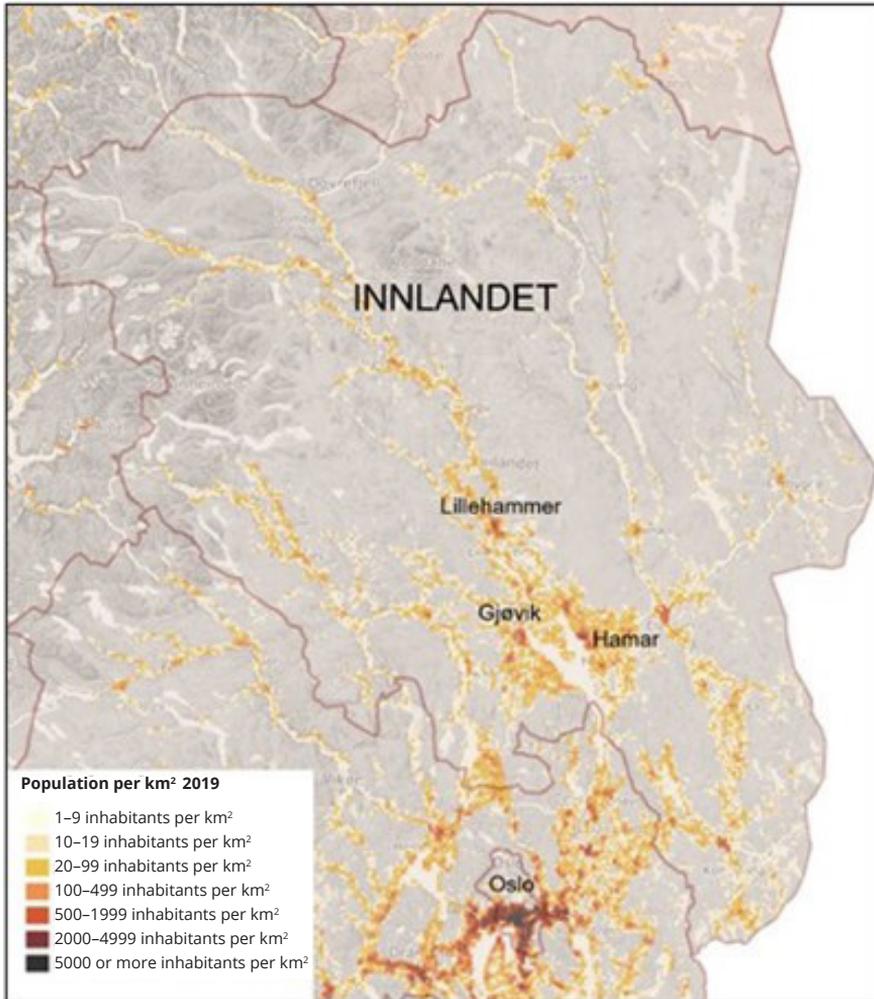
Innlandet County is in the south-eastern part of Norway (Fig. 2). The population is about 371 000, and the density is seven persons per km<sup>2</sup> (compared with 15 for Norway). There are some small cities in the county, the three largest being Hamar (29 000), Gjøvik and Lillehammer (both about 21 000 inhabitants) (Fig. 3). The population is to a large degree and increasingly settled in these cities and other smaller

settlements, making much of Innlandet a peripheral region with respect to permanent population. It is, however, attractive for second homes, with about 90 000 second homes, mostly located in the mountain areas and in municipalities with small population numbers (Statistics Norway 2022). Most of the second homeowners come from outside the County, mostly the Oslofjord area. Other important industries are agriculture, forestry, tourism, and some branches of production of goods.



**Fig 2.** Counties in Norway. (Source: Regjeringen 2019).

The population of Innlandet has increased by 4% in the last 30 years. The development has, however, been highly uneven among the 46 municipalities, with the population decreasing for 31 and increasing for the other 15, with changes ranging from -30% to +24% (Fig. 1 and Table 1). The general picture is that the large municipalities are getting larger and the smaller, smaller. It is those 31 municipalities with a long-term decrease in population that are under study in this article. It is also in these municipalities that an ageing population is experienced most strongly and earliest. Estimates for future population development in Innlandet are subject to great uncertainty, caused in part by international and national migration. Statistics Norway (SSB) estimates that the decline will continue until 2040 in 20 of the 31 municipalities, whereas another institute has in general criticised the estimates from SSB for being too optimistic for the most peripheral municipalities (Vareide 2021). The likelihood of a significant break in the population trend in these municipalities seems to be low.



**Fig 3.** Inhabitants per km<sup>2</sup> in Innlandet 2019. (Source: Statistics Norway 2021).

In the planning system in Norway, responsibilities are divided and shared between the three levels of government: national, regional (the counties) and local (the municipalities). Municipalities have extensive responsibilities within their territory, such as welfare services, primary schools, infrastructure (local roads, water, sewage etc.), land-use planning and societal development. The 356 municipalities of Norway are all political-administrative entities with equal status as autonomous bodies, grounded on a principle of municipal self-government. The municipalities are required to plan for societal development as well as the municipality's organisation of public services according to the Planning and Building Act (PBA 2008). The current 11 counties in Norway (which will become 14 by 2023) are responsible for county roads, collective transport, secondary schools, culture, regional development and regional planning. Municipal and regional planning constitutes an interactive planning model at local and regional levels, within a strategic policy-making activity embedded in a multi-level democratic system (Sandkjær Hanssen *et al.* 2018).

The municipal council itself directs the planning process (PBA 2008 § 3–3). Municipal master plans for societal development in Norway is vital in the strategic policy-making. The planning serves as a common arena for public, private and citizen actors to voice their interests, and the municipal council makes the final decisions. The purpose of planning is to “promote sustainable development in the best

interests of individuals, society and future generations" (PBA 2008 § 1–1). The municipality is responsible for formulating strategy and policy for local development that is holistic and sensitive to the local context, a principle embedded in the municipal master plan (PBA 2008 § 11–1). The master plan is based on the municipal planning strategy (PBA 2008 § 10–1), which is to "comprise a discussion of the municipality's strategic choices related to social development, including long-term land use, environmental challenges, sector activities and an assessment of the municipality's planning needs during the electoral term". Therefore, through the measure of a planning strategy, the Planning and Building Act of 2008 provides a strong platform for municipalities' strategic policy-making. Further, the political parties have a long-established practice of developing party programmes that deal with community development. Sometimes there may be some form of interaction between party programme work and planning.

Regional planning is directed by the county council, and should link local and regional needs and challenges, including 'translating' and 'adjusting' national policy to regional conditions, and coordinating municipal planning within a region (Higdem & Hagen 2018). The counties have the role as coordinators for public authorities on different levels, and are responsible for formulating Regional Planning Strategies (RPS) (PBA 2008 § 7–1) in close cooperation with designated partners such as the local municipalities, the regional state bodies and private interests. Thus, the counties represent the most important public authorities for enhancing regional development, and their main instruments in this regard is regional planning (Higdem & Sandkjær Hanssen 2014).

Regional plans may be developed for a territory or a theme and may cross several territorial (county or municipal) borders. The government relies for most part on soft-law instruments to implement a comprehensive regional plan. A regional plan may, however, give regional planning provisions [i.e. hard law] for land use in a regional master plan intended to safeguard national or regional considerations and interests (PBA 2008 § 8–5). Approved guidelines for each zone direct the implementation of the plan, as the Action plan of regional plans guides the different regional and local actors in their actions and future planning (PBA 2008 § 7–2). The County's planning staff also supervises the municipalities in their planning.

## **A mixed set of qualitative research methods**

The research was carried out in the winter and spring of 2021, as a part of an initial project called 'Realistic Planning'. The study consists of the 31 municipalities in the Innland County with a long-term decrease in population (Fig. 1 and Table 1). The data consist of i) a document study of three main types of documents – planning strategies, master plans and party programmes, ii) workshops, and iii) interviews.

We have reviewed the municipals' societal master plan and the planning strategy for all 31 shrinking municipalities. The societal master plan should, according to the Planning and Building Act (PBA 2008), 'decide on long-term challenges, goals and strategies for the municipal community as a whole and the municipality as an organisation' (PBA 2008 § 11–2, own translation). It thus includes both goals and strategies for the whole society (for example related to the development of jobs and demography) and for the more specific services and tasks for which they are responsible (e.g. primary schools and elderly care). The planning strategy is, simply put, a plan for what plans the municipality needs to develop or update for the next four years. According to the law this strategy 'should include a discussion of the municipality's strategic choices related to community development, including long-term land use, environmental challenges, the sectors' activities and an assessment of the municipality's planning needs during the election period' (PBA 2008 § 10–1, own translation). We also see that the plan includes both the community perspective and the more specific perspectives of the service sectors. Concerning the latter, what is included in both these documents is often excerpts of challenges, goals and strategies taken from separate planning documents relating to the different sectors or from written input to the documents from the sectors' administration.

In addition, we have assessed the local political-party programmes in six of these 31 municipalities. The six municipalities have been randomly chosen. It is particularly interesting to read texts that politicians have formulated themselves about the present and the desired future for their communities, without the influence of planners and planning legislation. How are the challenges of a shrinking population discussed and treated politically in these texts?

Finally, we have reviewed Innlandet County's regional planning strategy and regional political programmes. We have thus i) covered both the local and regional planning strategies and a selection of party programmes. ii) We have conducted four workshops, two with politicians and planners in Innlandet County and the others with the municipal executive board in two municipalities. iii) Finally, we have conducted 10 semi-structured interviews with top politicians at regional and local levels, that is, mayors, county mayors and key party politicians.

This mixed set of qualitative methods provides for an abductive approach and analysis (Blaikie 1993; Stake 2000) based on a set of theories in dialogue with several aspects of planning practices that provides a rich picture of planning in shrinking rural areas. As we have looked for patterns referring to theories of shrinking, the analysis is inspired by an abductive approach (Blaikie 1993) in its interactive development between theory and data. Planning practices includes politicians' understanding, local policy-making in party programmes, interviews with leading politicians and, of course, the planning documents describing today's situation and future perspectives. From our position, the politicians form an understanding of the range of possibilities and, hence, the framework for the planning activities.

The analysis is based on our research questions, and the research questions guided the interview guide, the workshops and the analysis of documents. We used the software-program NVivo, designed for analysing qualitative data, to analyse the experiences from the workshops and the interviews. We transcribed all interviews and imported them into NVivo, where we employed the interview guide to code the text. Moreover, we imported the notes and summaries from the workshops into NVivo and coded them on the basis of our research questions. Two researchers collaborated on the coding and the analysis to ensure the intersubjectivity of our understanding. NVivo allows for a systematic and transparent analysis.

We have restricted the analysed planning documents to the societal part of the municipal master plans and the planning strategies. Hence, a total assessment of all types of municipal plans, including plans for separate themes or sectors, would have given a broader and more comprehensive study. A more comprehensive study would also include more interviews with planners, politicians and other actors involved in planning at different levels, especially at the municipal level.

## **Current policy response and planning practice**

To what extent is the current demographic development reflected in planning and policy in Innlandet? Is there also in Innlandet a continued focus on goals for population growth and an unwillingness to face the consequences of shrinkage, which has been a common response in other parts of Europe? Do politicians and planners in Innlandet think we should change the way we plan today? In this section we present our findings on these questions, first, from the municipal planning strategies and societal master plans, then from the programmes by political parties and, finally, from the interviews with politicians and planners.

### *Municipal planning strategies and the societal master plan*

All municipalities include statistics and prognoses for population development, including population numbers and age composition in their plans, and so this is well known, presented and communicated. Nevertheless, most municipalities (20 of 31 municipalities, see Table 2, column 1) have goals for population growth in the coming years, and a few have goals for stabilising population numbers (Table 2, column 2), which is also unrealistic for most of them due to the prognosis. In fact, it is those municipalities with the strongest negative population prognosis that to the largest degree have goals for population growth. Several of the municipalities with goals of population growth strongly emphasise strategies for making them more attractive, especially for young people and families. Some of them are strongly influenced by Telemarksforskning, a Norwegian research institute whose consultants have developed what they call an 'attractiveness model', with indicators for attractivity connected to settlement, industries and visitors, and where they say that municipalities that succeed in developing their attractivity may be the one exception against the general trends (Aastvedt *et al.* 2019).

**Table 2.** How planning strategies and municipal plans for the 31 municipalities in Innlandet relates to current and future demographic development.

Municipality (name)	1. Population growth is a goal	2. Goal of stabilising pop.	3. Adaption of main services	4. Emphasis on existing pop.
Eidskog			(x)	X
Grue	X		X	
Våler	X		(x)	
Trysil	X		X	
Stor-Elvdal	X		(x)	
Rendalen	X		(x)	
Engerdal	X			
Tolga		X		
Folldal	X		(x)	
Os	X			(x)
Dovre	X		X	
Lesja		X	X	(x)
Skjåk	X		(x)	
Lom	(x)			
Nord-Fron	X			
Sel	X		X	
Gausdal				X
Søndre Land	X		X	
Sør-Aurdal			X	X
Vestre Slidre	X			
Nord-Odal	X		X	
Åsnes			X	X
Åmot	X			
Alvdal	X			
Vågå		X	X	
Sør-Fron				
Ringebu			X	
Nordre Land	X			
Etnedal			X	X
Nord-Aurdal			X	
Vang	(x)			

In Søndre Land municipality, having 5 535 inhabitants in 2021, Telemarksforskning have done an analysis in connection with the new societal part of their municipal plan. In the planning strategy, Søndre Land municipality writes:

Telemarksforskning estimates that if the municipality succeeds in improving its attractiveness and the development in the country does not worsen considerably, the population number in Søndre Land can be about 5 700 inhabitants in 2040. If the attractiveness in the local community is kept at about the same level as today it is estimated that the number of inhabitants will be about 4 700 in 2040. Søndre Land municipality will follow this up by developing strategies and measures to reverse the population decline. (Søndre Land kommune 2020, 11 our translation)

In these planning documents, there are few municipalities that problematise or reflect on the gap between actual population development and their goals for population growth in their planning documents. However, some do. Skjåk, with 2 165 inhabitants, is an illustrative example. In their planning strategy (approved in October 2017), they say that "Population numbers have decreased by more than four hundred persons in the last 30 years. If the development when it comes to births,

mortality, in- and out-migration does not change, one must expect that it also will be a decrease in the coming years" (Skjåk kommune 2017, 9–10, our translation). In the same document, when they discuss their experiences with the existing societal part of the municipal plan, they state that "The main experience with this plan is that some of the goals should be adjusted to a more realistic level, including population development" (Skjåk kommune 2017, 4, our translation).

In their new societal master plan (approved in 2020), three scenarios are presented: one they call 'pessimistic' with a decreasing population, one 'modest' with a stable population and one 'optimistic' with an increasing population. Then, it is stated that "The danger is that it is the pessimistic scenario that is realistic, but we must work towards the optimistic one" (Skjåk kommune 2020, 14, our translation). In explaining why they must do this, they discuss in the document the age structure, where they say that those challenges are not necessarily dramatic for them due especially to their many years of experience with a high proportion of old people. Then, it is stated that "But a society needs young blood to keep its vitality, and that makes it necessary for incentives for population growth. The future strategies for the municipality must have this as one of its main goals" (Skjåk kommune 2020, 10, our translation). This illustrates that despite their recognition of the need for more realistic goals, this is not followed up in the new plan. In our view, the scenario, which includes a decrease in population, is associated with many – and only – negative societal developments (increased centralisation of national/regional services, empty houses and schools etc.), compared with the two other scenarios. When scenarios are developed in this way, it makes it unacceptable for the municipality to have realistic goals for population development.

At the same time as most municipalities have population growth as a goal, most municipalities have a more adaptive and realistic approach when it comes to demographic development connected to the parts of the plans that consider main services (especially primary schools/kindergartens and healthcare). As Table 2 shows (column 4), more than half of the municipalities that have population growth as a goal simultaneously have an adaptive approach to services. The arguments typically used are both connected to demographic prognoses for changes in population numbers and age structures in their own municipality, implying, for example, the need to evaluate how many schools are needed in the municipality in the coming years.

But often it also refers to general trends in Norway connected to demography, especially more older people, expected tighter public finances for such services, and difficulties in recruiting personnel. This implies that there will be a strong need for innovation connected, among other factors, to making the services more efficient, the use of welfare technology and more private, public and NGO co-production. For example, when Grue municipality describes challenges within health and welfare services (under the main heading 'National expectations for societal and service developments'), some of their bullet points state: "[to] be able to deliver good / good enough services within a sustainable economic 'frame'. This means a service delivery that is more cost-effective"; "It will be necessary for solutions where as many as possible can stay home longer, with some need for services"; "[to] implement welfare technology"; "[to] have enough qualified and competent personnel for all the tasks that the municipality must solve" (Grue municipality 2016, 22, our translation).

A few of the municipalities do not have stated goals connected to population development, neither growth nor stabilising, which possibly indicates a kind of trivialisation. But some of them, such as Gausdal, Sør-Aurdal and Etnedal, rather have a quite strong focus on the existing population and community (Table 2, column 4). Hospers (2014) discusses this in connection with the response of accepting shrinkage. For example, in Gausdal the vision is 'Together we make it happen', and they will work together with inhabitants, local industry and NGOs, among others on the following areas: good everyday lives, a close and active local community, a greener municipality, public safety and preparedness, sustainable land use and sustainable economy. Connected to 'close and active local community' it is, among other things, stated *that* "We want Gausdal to be a local community where inhabitants of all ages participate, take joint responsibility and experience inclusion. We can create and develop a sustainable local community best together" (Gausdal municipality 2021,13 our translation). Having said that, we must stress that all municipalities, including those with population growth as a goal (often one of many goals), of course, deal with the existing community, and not only with potential in-migration etc.

As we have referred to in the text above, we have given an overview of some of the findings from the municipal planning strategies and master plans for each of the 31 municipalities in Table 2. As discussed, column 1 shows municipalities which have goals or visions of population growth (either as a general goal or vision or an underlying goal lower in the goal hierarchy). Column 2 shows municipalities that have goals for stabilising population numbers. Column 3 identifies which municipalities have an adaptive approach when it comes to the part of the planning documents that considers the provision of main services. Column 4 shows those municipalities where these planning documents include an explicit emphasis on the existing population. Where these responses are clearly identifiable in the documents, it is indicated with an X, whereas in the instances where it is not so clear, it is indicated with a small x in brackets. In the discussion section we shall consider how these findings, together with the findings from the other data, relate to policy responses elsewhere in Europe. What can be noticed already here is that the columns are not mutually exclusive, and we shall discuss this later as an important finding from this study.

### *Party programmes versus planning-dilemmas*

We have assessed party programmes in six municipalities with population decline and expected population decline. Overall, the programmes give the impression of great political commitment to their municipality.

Population development and settlement pattern are given attention in one or more of the party programmes in five of six municipalities. Most programmes signal an ambition to maintain population and secure settlement. Some programmes are clearly concerned about the importance of reversing a shrinking population trend. Many programmes are mainly concerned with what contributes to the municipality becoming a good community to live in, either as a permanent resident or as a leisure-home resident.

We found no party programme that clearly provided a realistic planning perspective for population development. At the same time, in the one municipality that did not directly mention population development, the political programmes were clearly ready to act with regard to societal development.

The number of political parties in these six municipalities varies between six and two. The material is too small to say anything about any differences between the various political parties. Many of the party programmes report that population development is at once an important and difficult topic. The programmes vary in length and thoroughness. Many of these parties are small, run by only a few people. Together, they cover many different topics or factors that the individual political party believes are important for population development. There are topics such as the conditions for various types of business, labour market, housing, housing plots, cottages (leisure homes), welfare services, kindergartens, schools, municipal employer policy, internet capacity, transport, recreation, nature and environmental protection, sports and culture and voluntary organisational life.

### *Local and regional politicians and planners*

All informants recognise and agree on the need for developing a new planning practice that addresses shrinkage. All the politicians we interviewed, except one, thought that one should have a more realistic approach to population development. This informant thought it was both politically desirable and even possible to reverse the decline in growth. However, there are different assessments in predictable political (ideological) directions on whether the rural municipalities and the shrinking regions should or ought to plan for a decreasing population as the planning horizon. Although there are variations, the main position among politicians is that centralisation, to a certain degree, is a result of a conscious government policy aiming at centralisation. However, there were differing views, somewhat depending on party affiliation, about the extent to which national policy had a decisive impact on population development.

For politicians, it is challenging to plan within a framework with a declining population as the realistic result. The explanation is that such a framework or planning will be regarded as the parties' primary preferred goals and visions for the future, which means an approval of the centralisation of

services, the downscaling of activities and the reduction of the number of schools and, not least, depopulation. One top politician states: "A party programme has a long horizon containing visions, ambitions and dreams. Planning may not to a similar degree be based on dreams; it is much more concrete. The recipe for success is when these two perspectives can meet, that is, the refraction-point between realistic plans and visions, ambitions and dreams."

Unsurprisingly, the interviewed planning officials hope for and recommend a more realistic approach to planning than the politicians. Most informants agree that the planning focus should shift from population growth and should pay more attention to citizens living and working in the rural municipalities and counties. Several of the rural municipalities in the Innlandet have more holiday homes than inhabitants (Statistics Norway 2022). This means that tourism plays a major role in business and job opportunities. It also implies that the number of inhabitants varies greatly, for example, during holidays. Most informants are positive about holiday homes and the possibilities the part-time inhabitants create for local and regional societal development.

### **Incoherent planning responses**

Our study illustrates how challenging it is for shrinking municipalities to break with established practices and modes of policy development into a more realistic and innovative planning approach. The 'stigma' of shrinking (Sousa & Pinho 2015) certainly shadows the ideals of the local politicians, at least when we observe how politicians formulate themselves orally in debates and in writing, such as in plans and party programmes. The stigma manifests itself as a political admission of defeat and a passive acceptance of negative downward spirals if the planning horizon were to be realistic about a non-growing population. This stigma will, from a political point of view, lead to a pessimistic view of shrinking societies as being unattractive for inhabitants to live in or move to. The innovative potential of a realistic approach (Hagen & Higdem 2020b), where development in a non-growth situation is possible, is not directly and distinctly found in the policy agendas in these municipalities.

On the one hand, our study reveals that municipalities, despite undergoing long-term shrinkage, dismiss it as a premise in their master planning and continue to plan for growth, much like shrinking rural areas and cities in other countries. It further suggests that the response in planning and policy cannot be characterised by only one type of response, but that several responses may appear simultaneously, connected to different parts of the societal master plans, thus, making the plans incoherent and contradictory.

The most important of such simultaneous responses is when the planning documents have goals for population growth as well as strategies for the adaptation of main services to a shrinking society. This discrepancy within the planning documents is not surprising and may have several explanations. We already know that the municipalities may fail to link together the different planning types in the planning system sufficiently (Sandkjær Hanssen & Aarsæther 2018).

Master planning is an arena where politicians steer and develop policy for societal development (PBA 2008), and the planning expertise may be neglected, as our informants suggest. Plans for public service provision, however, traditionally lean more on the planning expertise and the factual data for future dimensioning of services. Our study, therefore, suggests that there is adaptive capacity in the shrinking areas regarding services. Such an adaptation may be troublesome, but economically necessary. However, this area is not linked to the overall master planning and societal policy development, and this makes a realistic perspective even more elusive in policy development and the political parties. Although they are, of course, well-known facts for politicians when addressing the budget and coping with the local protesters when their small school is being closed, it does not affect the policy-making in general.

Therefore, we argue, as our analysis suggest, that politicians do not dare to introduce a realistic perspective on policy-making in shrinking societies, although many of them might just want to signal and work towards a more realistic approach. In the context of varied responses to a shrinking society, it is important to recognise that our data suggest that municipalities also deal with the existing community and collaborate with inhabitants, local industry, NGOs and so on, in their planning documents. Hence, municipalities do not address the potential of in-migration as the sole criterion of success, even though the overall goal is population increase.

A more realistic planning position will obviously challenge ways of thinking, traditions and economic systems where growth is regarded as a necessary as well as a desired development. It will also challenge what is politically rational practice for a politician and for a political party. Not least, a political party is dependent on gaining trust and support in elections. How can a political party and a politician achieve this even if, or precisely because, one recommends a realistic approach?

### *Incoherent planning responses*

Municipalities in Innlandet have, as mentioned, quite varied responses to shrinkage, and in relation to responses internationally we find several similarities, but also some notable differences. In comparison to north-eastern Germany (Beetz *et al.* 2008), we find 'improvement of competitiveness' to a large degree in Innlandet, and also 'passive restructuring', meaning adapting services to shrinkage (and often simultaneously, as discussed above). We do not find any positions where the standard and level of welfare systems and services are discussed or questioned, as Beetz, Huning and Plieninger (2008) have found in Germany. Municipalities in Innlandet, however, often discuss how welfare services can continue to be delivered at a high level in the future, owing to expected tighter finances, more old people, and lack of workforce. Though we do not investigate such differences between Germany and Norway in this article, we can speculate that it could be connected to the national economy, and we think that even questioning the principle of equal welfare services in the whole country might be just another stigma in Norway, in the same way as recognising shrinking in planning is.

Compared with what Hospers (2014) has found as responses to urban shrinkage in Europe, we find three of them in municipalities in rural Innlandet, but not 'utilizing shrinkage', where one tries to take advantage of the shrinkage. As our analysis suggests, several municipalities in Innlandet may at the same time have goals for population growth (like Hospers' 'countering shrinkage') as well as a practical and economic adaptive capacity for shrinkage towards future service provision (like Hospers' 'accepting shrinkage'). By finding contrasting responses simultaneously, we can add to Beetz Huning and Plieninger's (2008) and Hospers' (2014) types of responses this muddled or hybrid response, which might be labelled an 'incoherent response'. As discussed above, we do not find this surprising owing to how the Norwegian planning context, including documents, is designed. We do not know why this has not been revealed or commented upon by earlier research in other countries. It could be connected to differences in planning systems, differences in methods (i.e. which planning and policy documents have been studied) and the search for ideal types of responses.

### **Conclusions**

The main conclusion is twofold. On the one hand, our study reveals that municipalities, despite undergoing long-term shrinkage, dismiss it as a premise in their master planning and continue to plan for growth, much like rural areas in other countries. On the other hand, our study suggests that the responses in planning and policy are quite varied, and that there are municipalities and politicians that are highly aware that their plans and policies are unrealistic, but are confused about how to handle them and what the alternatives for the future may be. Our study illustrates how municipalities may adapt to shrinking in their plans for public service provision and that there are some municipalities that do not focus on growth, but emphasise the current population and quality of life. This indicates that there can be cases that can be interesting to learn from in future studies. Following Hospers (2014), we introduce a hybrid adaptation strategy.

Overall, today's planning practice in rural areas in Norway has neither dared nor wanted to adapt to the most likely developments of a shrinking population, let alone actually doing so openly and consistently. This reluctance has had critical and negative implications for these municipalities. It is crucial, therefore, both to develop knowledge of why local planning in Norway disregards shrinkage as well as the consequences this has for planning and the future of rural societies, and to develop theories, concepts and models for more suitable knowledge-based and innovative local planning that can meet this complex societal challenge.

Finally, we argue that planning, rather than encouraging unrealistic visions of tomorrow, should be far more concerned with solving challenges in the present and the probable future. Already in 1979, Lindblom called for planning theories that were 'in the range of possibilities' (Lindblom 1979). Many planning scholars (e.g. Krieger 1987; Flyvbjerg 1991; Stein & Harper 2012) have since agreed, and their works form the basis of our future planning research. Finally, future research should develop theories and models to stimulate more knowledge-based and innovative planning practices because innovation has become a pertinent and common term in regional as well as local planning and planning theory (Albrechts 2012; Hagen & Higdem 2020a, 2020b).

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