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# What can geographers do for shrinking geographies?

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For parts of the sparsely populated areas, the trends of globalisation, urbanisation and deindustrialisation constitute difficult circumstances. Population decline, escalating dependency ratios, lack of human and financial resources, and diminishing commercial and public services form part of lived experience in many of these areas. This paper discusses what geographers can do for these territories. The paper suggests that geographers can aid in understanding and demonstrating (a) how resources have been distributed in space over time and (b) why patterns of resource distribution take the shape they do. Geographers can also illuminate (c) what it means to live, work, and operate in shrinking, rural territories. Geographers could also (d) make implicit geographical imaginations explicit, (e) elucidate how shrinkage is dealt with by various policy actors, and (f) point to alternative policy directions. The paper also suggests that geographers in the Nordic countries could enrich an international research field of studies of shrinkage by (g) providing case studies or comparative studies from a Nordic context.

Keywords: shrinkage, policy, planning, rural, Nordic, periphery

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## Introduction

Despite ambitious goals on territorial cohesion, all of the Nordic countries display great spatial disparities. Significant parts of the Nordic countries consist of sparsely populated, remote, and rural areas. These territories include highlands and plains, forest landscapes and archipelagos. Residents here often congregate in small settlements rooted in former and present agricultural and industrial practices. These settlements form important sources of human identity and sense of belonging. They form important contexts for everyday and working life, for social mobilisation and political action. For parts of the remote and sparsely populated areas, the trends of globalisation, urbanisation, and deindustrialisation constitute difficult circumstances. Population decline, escalating dependency

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ratios, lack of human and financial resources, and diminishing commercial and public services form part of lived experience in many of these areas. It is these shrinking, rural territories and the small and mid-size towns found there that will be the focus of this paper. In fact, depopulation has been a planning condition for great parts of the municipal sector in Finland, Norway, and Sweden ever since the mid-1970s.

The pandemic of the past few years has defied the trajectories of globalisation and urbanisation. The increased opportunities for an educated, office-working middle class to manage their work from home have been interpreted as a window of opportunity for rural areas. In addition, a state of international insecurity has in some respects revealed the potential of rural areas in terms of food supply, self-sufficiency, and neighbourhood cooperation. Nevertheless, to what extent these events really are an impetus for development in rural territories is still uncertain. Until recently, a quarter of Nordic municipalities were expected to undergo a continued, sustained, and extensive population decline (Nordregio 2020).

With my contribution to this special issue of *Fennia*, I wish to raise a simple question: What can we – as geographers – do for these territories? The question indeed assumes that we should do something, and here, I would stress that knowledge of shrinking areas is of utmost relevance also for those residing outside of them. Shrinking areas are manifestly interdependent with their surroundings, with growing urban areas locally, nationally, and globally. Our understanding of these areas, therefore, has implications for social cohesion, political legitimacy, and democratic governance at a larger scale. These are arguments that I will return to by the end of my manuscript.

In this article, I will suggest that geographers can do quite a bit, and I will present some examples of what has already been done. In short, I will suggest that geographers can aid in understanding and demonstrating (a) how resources have been distributed in space over time and (b) why patterns of resource distribution take the shape they do. The question of why patterns take the shape they do is ever-present. The answers include references to longstanding historical structures as well as the transformation of such structures; power relations and macro-economic conditions as well as changes in individual preferences and the ways in which human beings understand and conceptualise the world around them.

Geographers can also help to illuminate (c) what it means to live, work, and operate in shrinking, rural territories. This question, too, is of enduring relevance. Earlier studies have acknowledged what rurality, shrinkage, and limited access to human and financial resources mean for children and young people growing up in such areas, as well as for families, workers and employers who want to recruit new talent. Previous studies have also demonstrated what rurality and shrinkage mean for patterns of local demand and supply, and the public sector's opportunities to plan for and provide services.

Throughout, and in parallel with, all these assignments, geographers could contribute by (d) making implicit spatial norms and assumptions explicit. How do geographical imaginations arise, and what implications do they have for decisions made in our daily lives, in businesses or politics? Another, related task for the geographer (a favourite of mine, in fact) is to elucidate (e) how the specific conditions of rurality and shrinkage are dealt with by formal policy and planning actors at local, regional, or state levels, and by actors with no formal political mandate. How are rurality and shrinkage interpreted by various policy actors? What is framed as an asset and as a problem, and what solutions are presented to the problems named? Following from this, we could also contribute by (f) pointing to alternative policy directions – both in terms of how policies and planning are pursued, and in terms of related planning and policy content.

In conclusion and given that I present these arguments in a Nordic context, I should also stress that the Nordic countries have several characteristics that make them particularly interesting to study. The Nordic countries are characterised by long distances and extensive rural areas that in many cases house a sparse, ageing, and declining population. Importantly, this appears in the context of a welfare state structure where the state, region, and/or municipality have far-reaching obligations to citizens regardless of where they live. With this in mind, geographers in the Nordic countries could (g) contribute with exciting case studies, and/or engage in comparative studies. In this way, we can enrich an international research field of shrinkage that has mainly focused thus far on shrinking in an urban context.

All of the potential contributions mentioned above are of importance. Uneven demographic change is an inherently 'spatial' process, and for a geographer, it is fascinating to follow areas in demographic transition, and try to understand how these transitions can be described and understood, why they come about, what consequences they have, how various actors respond to them, and how we as human beings relate to and speak about them. In every aspect, place matters.

What scholarly assignment we choose to take up depends on a variety of things. It can depend on what academic environment we belong to and what analytical and methodological skills we have, what funding we have, what data we have access to, and what courses we teach. It also depends on our personal interests and perhaps also our normative standpoints, personal life experiences, feelings, and identities. For geography to make a difference for shrinking areas, we need to embrace this multitude of standpoints, perspectives, and alternatives. It is a richness that we should be proud of.

The literature overview below will, no doubt, be full of shortcomings. My search for relevant literature departed from my own knowledge of the field. For the most part, I have searched for texts written in the Nordic countries, in a Northern European context, or the Northern Hemisphere during the last two decades. A broader or more systematic literature review would probably reveal a different picture. As Kovanen (2022) rightly emphasises in her comments on my text, my overview does not address global resource patterns, global interdependencies, or patterns of depopulation in the global south. My course of action also involves a risk of excluding colleagues who have made important contributions to any one of the fields I identify, or indeed to fields that I have overlooked. Yet, I hope that my overview can serve as the beginning of a conversation that will unfold in time and space; a conversation by which we all become a little wiser and by which the world might become a slightly better place to live.

## How have resources been distributed in space over time?

Geographers have a long tradition of exposing and explaining (Martin 2001) spatial patterns of inequality, as well as disparities in settlement, growth, employment, and productivity. This tradition is of ineffable value to those of us who are trying to increase knowledge about shrinking geographies. Thus, before we can engage to any degree with causes, effects, and responses in relation to shrinkage (Haase *et al*. 2017; Döringer *et al*. 2020), we need to know more about how resources are actually distributed in space. Here, I will organise the presentation around three interrelated questions, id est what, where, and when. First, what is it that is shrinking, declining, or disappearing when scholars talk about shrinkage? Second, where – in what localities or at what scale – can shrinkage be observed; and third – when did it all happen? Makkonen, Inkinen and Rautiainen (2022) dissect these issues meticulously in their contribution to this issue. I strongly recommend the reader to consult their paper for a thorough methodological discussion on how to measure shrinkage.

The what question is perhaps the most debated. The implicit starting point for research on shrinkage tends to be the observation of a diminishing population base (even if economic decline and the retrieval of public and private services have also been used to define shrinkage). A shrinking city has been defined in terms of a densely populated urban area which has faced population losses for more than two years (Wiechmann & Bontje 2015). Rural shrinkage, on the other hand, has been defined by Grasland and colleagues (2008, 25) as "a region … losing a considerable proportion of its population over a period greater than or equal to one generation". However, as emphasised in Copus and others (2020, 3), what constitutes a "considerable proportion" and "one generation" needs to be more accurately defined.

Still, many studies have underlined that the fact of there being "fewer people" in an area is far from enough if we seek to "capture the complexity of population loss" (Hartt 2019, 1652). Population loss, according to Beauregard (2009), must be unpacked into the categories of prevalence, severity, persistence, and geographical incidence. These four categories offer a better understanding of the instances and magnitude of population loss, its duration, as well as its spatial distribution (Beauregard 2009; Hartt 2019).

It should also be noted that the composition of the population tends to change with depopulation. Selective out-migration and declining birth rates imply that many shrinking places are also ageing

places (Abramsson & Hagberg 2018), where a smaller share of the inhabitants have a higher education or are of working age (Amcoff & Westholm 2007). Thus, several studies mention the loss of highly qualified employees as a major problem in shrinking areas (for an overview, see Nelle 2016). Examples of studies in this area point to municipalities in Sweden that have lost 60% of their pupils since the 1970s (Syssner 2018a), and localities in Germany where the age cohort of 15- and 18-year-olds decreased by 57% within a time span of 15 years (Meyer *et al*. 2016). This points to the distinction between active and legacy shrinking. Active shrinking is driven by negative net migration, while legacy shrinking is due to unfavourable age structures that in turn are due to out-migration of the past. Of course, one could question whether it is really lower numbers of people that bring problems to the table in shrinking areas, or whether it is the surplus of older people and the shortage of tax-paying people of working age that is the main issue. In her commentary on this paper, Meijer (2022) rightly asks whether the research community should perhaps abandon the concept of shrinkage, and rather focus on the challenges that come with certain forms of population change.

The literature reviewed here encompasses a lively discussion on the definitions of shrinkage, decline, depopulation, and related concepts. One critical question is whether a place that faces a loss of human resources and population numbers always needs to be understood or represented as distressed or in crisis. Terms such as "legacy cities" and "cities in transition" have been used to provide a more neutral framing of shrinking cities (Haase *et al*. 2017, 97). In fact, several studies indicate that even if economic decline and demographic shrinkage tend to be lumped together, they must be regarded as two distinct phenomena (Hartt 2019). Urban growth is often made synonymous or equal with prosperity, and shrinkage with decline and poverty. Hirt and Beauregard (2021) however use a historical perspective to nuance the tendency to equate shrinkage with distress, and argue that under certain circumstances, shrinkage can be good for cities and their residents. In a study of shrinking cities in the US, Hartt (2019) concludes that 27% of 88 shrinking cities in the US have income levels that are greater than their surrounding regions. Another study revealed that urban shrinkage in Europe and the US is "closely associated with economic decline, while urban shrinkage in Japan is closely linked to demographic factors" (Döringer *et al*. 2020, 1694). Makkonen, Inkinen and Rautiainen (2022) suggest that population data can be combined with data on employment and/or housing vacancies to give a more detailed picture of the state of affairs in an area. Meijer (2022) points out that because of migration and the post-pandemic situation, we can now observe how formerly shrinking regions have started to grow – without any signs of increases in prosperity.

The where question is pivotal, both academically and practically. To begin with, the literature on shrinkage emanates primarily from critical planning studies, rooted in a context of large cities primarily in the US and Germany. This means that the focus of international literature on shrinkage initially was devoted to urban environments. In recent years, however, the focus on urban settlements has been questioned by many. Hospers and Reverda (2015) stress that population decline tends to be more prevalent in rural areas than in urban ones. Döringer and colleagues (2020) point to the observation that aside from large cities, small and medium-sized settlements also experience population decline. In this volume, Albrecht and Kortelainen (2022) point to the fact that small towns, and especially downtown areas in such towns, have received rather limited research interest. Cunningham-Sabot and Fol (2009) state that in France, depopulation can mainly be observed in cities with fewer than 50,000 inhabitants, something that is later confirmed by Béal and others (2019, 195), who stress that shrinkage in France is "mostly concentrated within small and medium-sized towns and cities". Studies carried out in a Nordic context stress that due to rapid ongoing urbanisation, rural depopulation has become "a key concern" (Niedomysl & Amcoff 2011, 275) in many European countries, while at the same time, many remote and rural areas are suffering from an out-migration of young female adults (Hedberg & Haandrikman 2014; Rauhut & Littke 2016).

Indeed, the where question invokes a discussion of urban versus rural shrinkage. However, it also calls for a discussion about the scale at which shrinkage should be measured. Makkonen, Inkinen and Rautiainen (2022) demonstrate how different the world appears to be depending on the scale we use when describing it. Measuring demographic change on a larger scale – national, regional, or sub-regional – may very well mask intra-regional heterogeneity and differences across and within municipalities and postal code areas. A closer look at the municipal level, they show, reveals that

growing areas quite often contain pockets of shrinkage, whereas it is much rarer that shrinking regions include substantial pockets of growth.

In their contribution to this issue, Hagen, Higdem & Overvåg (2022) highlight that their case study does show population growth on a regional scale. The growth is, however, very unevenly distributed; the region they refer to has grown overall in recent years, but 31 of its 46 municipalities still face long-term population decline. This in turn leads us to the question of how dominant the trajectory of shrinkage is in a given society. The consequences of shrinkage for policy and planning and for everyday life are of course determined by the magnitude of the issue, in terms of the intensity of the average annual population change, its duration over time (Copus *et al*. 2020), and its geographical scope. On this point, Copus and colleagues (2020, 6) underline that almost 60% of those NUTS 3 regions that are "predominantly rural" or "intermediate" display sustained population losses[1], whereas Batunova and Gunko (2018, 1581) point to the fact that "about 70% of Russian cities have lost some of their population". These figures point to shrinkage being an important question for substantial parts of our society.

The when question refers to the temporal dimension of shrinkage. If there is a change in size – of population, resources, or whatever – that change must occur within a certain period of time. In a study from Portugal, Alves and colleagues (2016) make an initial distinction between cities that experience both growth and decline during various time periods on the one hand, and cities facing a continuous decline with no experience of population growth on the other. Copus and colleagues (2020) provide a distinction between medium and long-term rural shrinking processes and more dramatic, short-term processes. Examples of the latter are periods of rapid industrialisation or political adjustments such as the German unification, post-socialist transformation, and EU enlargement.

The above discussion leads us to the question of what timespan we should use when intending to map shrinkage, and at what point in time a place qualifies as a shrinking place. When can we claim to observe shrinkage, and how persistent does shrinkage need to be for a place to deserve the label of a shrinking one? In their contribution to this issue, Makkonen, Inkinen and Rautiainen (2022) go into detail on the question of temporality. They highlight that previous studies on shrinkage have utilised both theory-driven and ad hoc-like analysis periods – the latter often due to data availability. The temporal scale used in research on shrinkage, they point out, can vary from a few years up to several decades.

An equally important question is when a place seizes to be a shrinking place. Personally, I have experience of interviewing local government representatives from municipalities that had experienced population decline almost every year for several decades – except for the year the interview took place. On these occasions, the interviewees were generally immensely proud to announce that their municipality was no longer a shrinking one. In the Nordic context, the migration crisis from 2015 led to a considerable but impermanent influx of migrants in many small and sparsely populated municipalities, leading to growing population figures for some years. The consequences of long-term shrinkage did not, however, dissolve the second the migrants entered the municipality. Rather, the consequences of shrinkage seem to be enduring, and take time to fade out after a place has started to grow again.

But of course, a place that once had a declining population base is not necessarily doomed to continue on that path. On this point, Döringer and colleagues (2020, 1700) stress that "the majority of formerly shrinking cities in the UK have overcome processes of deindustrialisation and are experiencing population increase". In this issue, Lundmark, Carson and Eimermann (2022) explore how local governments in the Swedish Arctic that struggled for years to handle demographic decline are now having to adjust to expectations of the growth that will come with giga-investments in green energy along the urbanised north Swedish coast. Their analysis shows that while such investments are predicted to create a new regional "golden age" (*ibid*., 157), there are still obstacles preventing local governments from acting fast and taking advantage of the green expansion. Despite its importance, the temporal dimension tends to be "rather absent" from many case studies of shrinkage, as Döringer and others (2020, 1707) put it.

As we have seen, the question of how resources are distributed in space has been asked by many, and with reference to a variety of resource categories, scales, places, and time periods. Altogether, these contributions provide us with broad, generalised overviews and common understandings – but

also with diverse, detailed, nuanced, and multi-faceted representations of how shrinkage can be manifested in space over time. This work is indispensable for other scholars to build on while trying to understand, for example, why resource patterns look the way they look, what the consequences of these patterns are, and how they have been received by a variety of actors.

## Why do resource distribution patterns take the shape they do?

The question of why resources are distributed the way they are is of everlasting relevance. Attempts to answer it will of course vary across time and space and differ depending on what resource category is being investigated. In the literature, there seems to be consensus that there is no grand explanation as to why some places shrink while others grow. Thus, even if shrinkage is global phenomenon, it is clear that its drivers differ across and within continents, as well as across and within states and regions (Haase *et al*. 2017). Shrinkage can be understood as a local manifestation, as Hospers (2013b) puts it, of a multitude of interrelated and place-specific conditions (see also Syssner 2020b).

The lack of overarching explanations notwithstanding, the literature tends to include references to both natural environments and location factors as well as to human-made structural conditions, historical patterns, and power relations in the attempt to explain growth and decline (Copus *et al*. 2020). Conditions such as structural transformation, deindustrialisation (Pallagst *et al*. 2013), changes in local labour market dynamics, the rise of the service economy, globalisation, and increased general mobility have all been referred to in attempts to explain why some places shrink whereas others grow (Reckien & Martinez-Fernandez 2011; Haase *et al*. 2012; Hospers 2013a; Hospers & Reverda 2015; Kotilainen *et al*. 2015; Wiechmann & Bontje 2015; Németh & Hollander 2016). Some studies have highlighted changes at the micro level while trying to explain demographic decline. Examples are studies of changing preferences and behaviour among the population (Reckien & Martinez-Fernandez 2011), or attempts to understand the factors that are decisive for migration (Guimarães *et al*. 2016).

In a meta-analysis of 70 papers on European and Japanese urban shrinkage, Döringer and colleagues (2020) identify eight causes of urban shrinkage. In the post-socialist, Mediterranean, and western regions of Europe, deindustrialisation is most often referred to as a cause of shrinkage (32%, 32%, and 46% respectively), while in Japan suburbanisation, ageing, and low birth rates are cited as the main causes.

When trying to understand why some places shrink, we need to come back to the earlier point on active and legacy shrinkage. Active shrinkage implies that more people are moving away from an area than into it. Yet, both immigrants and emigrants can be divided into several subcategories: regional, national, and international in- and out-migrants, migrants of different genders, ages, and levels of education, as well as return migrants and those who leave a place for good (Niedomysl & Amcoff 2011). But even if out-migration for whatever reason is one important cause of shrinkage, population decline can also be explained by low fertility rates, ageing, and high mortality rates (Hospers & Reverda 2015; Wiechmann & Bontje 2015; Copus *et al*. 2020; Döringer *et al*. 2020). Of course, low fertility rates can be interpreted as a consequence of a prior active shrinking, or of an ongoing selective outward migration. Thus, if net migration is negative among the young (i.e. the future adults), this will affect fertility rates in the long-term perspective (Hospers & Reverda 2015).

The why question, meanwhile, often points critically towards inequalities and asymmetrical and unequal conditions for societal development in different places. Uneven demographic change has then been framed as due to interdependent processes of peripheralisation and centralisation (Lang 2012) or as a vivid illustration of inequalities (Pallagst *et al*. 2013). Some voices have stressed that the spatial centralisation of human, financial, and other resources in fact determine the peripheralisation of other spaces (Cunningham-Sabot & Fol 2009; Lang 2012). In this regard, Martinez-Fernandez and others (2012, 213) have argued that the new global economic order has clearly benefited some localities, whereas others are experiencing an "outflow of capital and human resources".

To some extent, the reason why resources are distributed the way they are in space has been framed as an effect of policy. Here, it should be noted that geography has a rich tradition of explicating how public policy contributes to forming and altering socio-spatial relations (Jones *et al*. 2004). Even

policies that are habitually regarded as "nonspatial" policies prove, as Martin (2001, 203) puts it, to have "varying consequences and implications" across space.

In closing this section, we can conclude that the explanations for shrinkage and population decline are many, overlapping, and varying. Yet, no study has shown, to my knowledge, that shrinkage happens because of bad decisions made by local authorities in shrinking places. This may sound simplistic, but it is an important message to those who seek to develop policy instruments with which the causes and consequences of shrinkage are to be met.

## The consequences of shrinkage

Another task for geographers in relation to shrinking territories is to systematically describe the consequences and effects of shrinkage, losses, and decline (Haase *et al*. 2017). Scholarly interest in the effects of shrinkage was first aroused in an urban context and in countries outside the Nordic region. In these studies, an oversized infrastructure was often recognised as one of the most palpable effects of extensive population decline (Wiechmann & Pallagst 2012; Johnson *et al*. 2014; Sousa & Pinho 2015; Németh & Hollander 2016). These and later studies have demonstrated that depopulation has consequences for housing in terms of "abandonment, vacancies, infrastructural surplus or degradation" (Batunova & Gunko 2018, 1583; see also Dubeaux & Cunningham Sabot 2018); commercial and public services; water and wastewater management (Faust *et al*. 2016); but also for the capacity for participatory, integrated, and sustainable planning (Pallagst *et al*. 2017) and the prospects for long-term sustainable development (Martinez-Fernandez *et al*. 2012; Sousa & Pinho 2015; Syssner 2018a, 2020c; Pallagst *et al*. 2021). Thus, fixed assets such as roads, parking spaces, water supplies, and sewage gradually become oversized in shrinking areas (Luescher & Shetty 2013; Hollander 2018; Syssner 2020c). Many studies have shown how the numbers of pupils in an area decline, while at the same time the costs for school buildings remain the same. Houses, dwellings, and business premises become difficult to sell, and the result is less capital for maintenance and re-investment in physical infrastructure (Wiechmann & Pallagst 2012; Sousa & Pinho 2015).

Recent studies have broadened the understanding of consequences of shrinkage, and regard it as a more multi-dimensional process (Pallagst *et al*. 2017) that brings many challenging issues related to social cohesion and welfare to political agendas in shrinking areas. Social cohesion does appear as an objective on policy agendas in many settings, but as pointed out by Cortese and colleagues (2013) in a study from central Europe, it is even more critical in shrinking areas, where ageing, segregation, and socio-spatial inequalities need to be managed in a situation of job losses and economic constraints. Depopulation, as stated by Pallagst (2015), tends to correspond with issues such as poverty, segregation, and homelessness – at least in the US and in countries where welfare state structures are weak. Issues such as decreasing labour-related tax revenues (Hollander 2011), rising per-capita expenditures for social services, and increasing tax rates and fees (Fjertorp 2013), as well as emerging pessimism among residents and a loss of trust in local government (Matthiesen 2005) have been identified as challenging for shrinking areas.

Importantly, the effects of shrinkage differ between contexts. As explicated by Hartt (2019, 1655), shrinking geographies "can exist on a spectrum between prosperity and decline". Economic decline is not by necessity a consequence of depopulation. In their meta-analysis of 70 papers of European and Japanese urban shrinkage, Döringer and others (2020) identify the 10 most frequently cited effects of shrinkage. In post-socialist Europe, housing vacancies are the most often described effect (in 36% of the papers), while in Mediterranean Europe, it is unemployment (in 31% of the papers), and in Western Europe, economic decline (in 33% of the papers). This is in contrast with papers from Japan, where urban decay is the most frequently mentioned effect of shrinkage (in 61% of the papers). As noted by Meijer (2022) , the consequences of shrinkage are very much context dependent. Societies that undergo demographic decline, and that lack social capital or beneficial networks, tend to suffer more from decline than others (Meijer 2020).

In the Nordic countries, shrinkage and depopulation are mainly a concern for small and sparsely populated municipalities. In such territories, the visual manifestations of shrinkage might be dissimilar to those in a shrinking urban core. The labour-related tax bases and revenues decline (Amcoff &

Westholm 2007; see also Pallagst 2015; Hollander 2018) and a smaller share of the population is of working age. At times, unemployment rates are higher (while at the same time there is a need for skilled labour in the private and public sector). As a result, the per-capita expenses for public services and welfare tend to rise (see Fjertorp 2013). This, it is often argued, makes the shrinking community an even less attractive place to stay or to settle in. Still, shrinkage is not always visually manifested in the main town or city of an area. More often, shrinkage appears on the periphery of the municipalities – in villages and settlements distant from the urban centre.

One of the foundations of the Nordic welfare model is that the quality of the welfare services should be equal, regardless of where it is provided. That is, citizens in remote and rural areas have the legal right to the same quality of schools or healthcare as those in wealthy urban areas. In all Nordic countries, the state government must balance the potential conflict between the similar legal demands and differing financial capacities of the municipalities, by a considerable spatial redistribution of financial means. In any case, the quality and the accessibility of public welfare services in remote, shrinking areas are higher that they would have been without the equalisation system that handles the spatial redistribution of financial means. Still, as pointed out by Carson and colleagues (2022) in this issue, a large-scale disinvestment in key services can be identified in many rural, depopulating areas. Drawing from the case of Southern Lapland, they demonstrate that these disinvestments are seldom strategically planned, but occur on a case-by-case basis as a response to population loss and increased costs. A consequence of this, it is stressed, is the creation of "resource deserts", id est "geographic areas without ready access to essential services" (*ibid*., 212).

## Geographical imaginations

The literature on shrinkage has also acknowledged the importance of how shrinking geographies are discursively represented or framed. Here, geographical theory helps us understand how geographical imaginations (Harvey 1974; Tuan 1990; Gregory 1994; Sligo & Massey 2007) are put to work, how they guide policymakers in various policy areas (Ward 2007), and what relevance they have for individual strategies.

To begin with, shrinkage and demographic decline are often perceived as something tragic and deeply problematic. Shrinking areas tend to be framed as less favoured areas (Ribeiro & Marques 2002), or as the losers of the globalised economy (Camarda *et al*. 2015; Sousa & Pinho 2015). That depopulation is framed so negatively, it is suggested in the literature, is not only because of its actual disadvantages but also due to growth being such a dominant societal norm (Bontje 2004; Hospers 2013a, 2013b; Luescher & Shetty 2013; Syssner 2018a; Syssner & Siebert 2020; Halonen 2022). Whereas growth constitutes an important signal value in politics, population decline "carries the negative weight of a symptom of an undesirable disease" (Sousa & Pinho 2015, 2) and has come to be associated with "a certain stigma" (Martinez-Fernandez *et al*. 2012, 220; see also Hartt 2019). Apart from this, representations of shrinking places often take dramatic forms. Hartt (2019, 1652) discusses the "sensationalism of extreme decline" and notes that extraordinary cases like Detroit have attracted a vast academic and media interest and thus moulded the discourse of shrinkage. Makkonen, Inkinen and Rautiainen (2022, 139) make the observation that shrinkage is quite often framed as a deviation from a norm or as "a temporary downturn in the normal course of growth".

A key concept in the literature is that of territorial stigmatisation. To Goffman (1990), stigmatisation is a process by which a negative attribute leads to the whole of what is stigmatised being reduced to what the stigma itself symbolises. The concept of territorial stigmatisation has also been used to help us understand how discrediting differentness and the blemish of place impacts upon various actors – individuals, groups, and political bodies (Wacquant *et al*. 2014; see also Wacquant 2007). In the literature, we come across several studies that suggest that peripheralisation as such is connected with stigmatisation (Weck & Beißwenger 2014), that population decline involves aspects of shame among citizens who "themselves have internalised the perception of failure" (Sousa & Pinho 2015, 3). Several studies suggest that those who reside in stigmatised areas are affected by the stigma in the sense that it influences how they view themselves and their surroundings, how they are viewed by others, and their decisions to out-migrate (Meyer *et al*. 2016). It is also

suggested that stigmatising discourses can justify controversial top-down policy interventions in the areas concerned (August 2014).

Furthermore, it is well documented that local policymakers tend to believe that if they talk about their community as a shrinking one, they will contribute to a further decline. If key actors in society talk about a place as being in decline, it will inevitably be recognised as such and thus, less people will choose to move to or invest in that place, the argument goes (Haase *et al*. 2012; Syssner 2018a). Such discourses, as suggested by Haase, Nelle and Mallach (2017, 99), may be understood as a filter that impacts what subjects are framed as "problems, challenges and opportunities", what solutions are suggested, and how policy is designed. The study of geographical imaginations also includes critical analyses of how public and private actors try to create, counteract, or reinforce people's images of or notions of a place – for example, through place branding (Syssner 2012; Ortiz-Moya 2015; Eriksson 2020). Hagen, Higdem and Overvåg (2022) contribute to the above discussion by concluding that shrinkage certainly is stigmatised in a Norwegian context, but that differences can be identified across professional, administrative, and municipal boundaries.

## Policy responses to shrinkage

Parts of the literature reviewed here have researched the policy-, democracy-, and governance-related aspects of shrinkage. The study of (and involvement in) public policy by geographers has a long tradition (Jones *et al*. 2004), even if the relation between applied policy research (often financed by external partners) and the prospects of maintaining a critical stance within the discipline has been a subject of recurring debate (Pain 2006; Bell 2011; Woods & Gardner 2011). In the 1970s, Harvey (1974, 18) critically asked whether geographers can at all "contribute successfully, meaningfully and effectively to the formulation of public policy". The question was grounded in the colonial experience of the discipline, in the tradition of serving the power, and in the ethnocentric and paternalistic tendencies of traditional geographic literature. The tradition of the discipline thus made Harvey prevail a critical and sceptical stance in the matter.

The question of whether and how geographers should impinge on public policy has been raised many times since (Coppock 1974; Hoggart 1996). Geographers have been proposed for positions as public intellectuals, activists, policymakers, experts, providers of expert knowledge, and evaluators (Massey 2004, 2006; Ward 2005, 2007, 2011; Pain 2006). Opinions diverge as to what extent geographers have fulfilled these roles, but in many cases, it is at least expected from research councils and other parts of the research policy system that the knowledge we supply should be accessible and useful for policymakers.

In the field of shrinking geographies, many have engaged in the policy and planning responses to shrinkage. The question of how local, regional, and state governments deal with shrinkage has been raised in many contexts. A wide range of studies show that often, demographic decline is very much disregarded in local policy and planning (Bontje 2004; Martinez-Fernandez *et al*. 2012; Wiechmann & Pallagst 2012; Sousa & Pinho 2015; Schatz 2017; Syssner 2020c). Unrealistic and biased ideas about growth and the negative framing of demographic decline have constituted a hindrance to the evolvement of strategies for coping with decline, as several studies have shown (Lang 2012; Wiechmann & Pallagst 2012; Hospers 2013b; Pallagst *et al*. 2017; Syssner 2020a). Studies from several continents demonstrate, as Schatz (2017) states, that planners and politicians tend to employ policies with a pro-growth orientation, even if the reality they are coping with is clearly one of decline (Batunova & Gunko 2018). In a comparative study of agenda setting in shrinking cities in various state contexts, however, Bernt and colleagues (2014, 1749) point out that even though shrinkage is rarely responded to in a comprehensive manner, this cannot be entirely blamed on policymakers who need to "overcome their growth-oriented cultural perceptions". Rather, it is suggested, the reason must be related to a variety of institutional settings and political dynamics that are very much place-specific (*ibid*.).

The disregard of shrinkage as a planning condition can have various effects. Wiechmann and Pallagst (2012, 263) have suggested that it deepens the negative consequences of shrinkage, since "planning for shrinking cities does not work if it presupposes urban growth". Another effect is the development of less transparent or explicit strategies for coping with decline (Syssner 2020b). A study

from France suggests, for example, that since there is no national policy framework for how to deal with demographic decline, French local actors have produced a wide variety of local strategies, frameworks, and tools for dealing with the issue (Béal *et al*. 2019). There are strategies for rightsizing in France, the authors suggest, "even if neither academic research nor policymakers qualify them as such" (*ibid*., 193). This underlines an important point: formal policy response is not necessarily explicit. Local strategies dealing with shrinkage have, as Béal and others (2019, 193) suggest, "been 'silently' implemented in French shrinking cities over the past 15 years". The Swedish case shows the same tendency. Local governments do take decisions intended to adapt physical infrastructure, social services, and organisations to new demographic conditions; but the decisions are not communicated as adaptation nor as policy (Syssner & Siebert 2020).

Apart from the broad consensus on the tendency to neglect shrinkage in policy and planning, several attempts have been made to define certain phases in policy responses to shrinkage. There are variations in how shrinkage is talked about and debated and how policies are designed and implemented, as Haase, Nelle and Mallach (2017) point out – not only across the globe but also within continents. Pallagst and others (2017, 9) distinguish between "expansive strategy; maintenance strategy; and planning for decline", whereas Haase, Nelle and Mallach (2017, 99) refer to policies designed to "address, mitigate or reverse urban shrinkage". Previously, Hospers and Reverda (2015) have referred to four stages of reactions to population decline among politicians, planners, citizens, and others. The first stage, according to the model, is to trivialise or even to deny the fact that population numbers are continually shrinking. In the second stage, attempts are made to reverse population trends, counteract decline, and facilitate growth. The third stage in Hospers and Reverda's model is when actors learn to cope or to deal with shrinkage. In the fourth stage, actors are prepared to try to use shrinkage as an opportunity. A similar argument is developed by Hagen, Higdem and Overvåg (2022) in this volume. Overall, these models demonstrate that the policy response to shrinking can be understood as a continuum where ignorance and denial are found at one end, and active and innovative utilisation of place-specific circumstances at the other.

In previous articles, I have made a distinction between growth policy and adaptation policy (Syssner 2014). This distinction bears similarities to the distinction made by Copus *et al*. (2020) between mitigation and adaptation policies, where the former seeks to disrupt the trend of demographic decline, whereas the latter accepts continued shrinking and focuses on increasing wellbeing of the residents (*ibid*.). Others have elaborated on concepts such as smart shrinkage or rightsizing.

Smart decline or smart shrinkage has featured mostly in planning discourse, presented as an alternative to traditional growth-focused planning approaches and as "planning for less – fewer people, fewer buildings, fewer land uses" (Hartt 2019, 1653; see also Popper & Popper 2002). Yet, a broader interpretation of what smart decline could be has also been presented. Hollander (2011, 132) has suggested that a smart decline strategy should have the capacity to "reduce municipal expenditures to a lower level, concomitant with the city´s new smaller population", not only in relation to physical planning. One of the earliest and most famous examples of smart shrinkage is the Youngstown 2010 Plan from the city of Youngstown in Ohio. The plan intended to enact a controlled management of shrinkage, and received much positive attention. In a critical account, Rhodes and Russo (2013, 305) however describe the plan as an "exclusionary project" that focused on the redevelopment of downtown areas while neglecting other neighbourhoods that "continue to experience high levels of unemployment, vacancy, and crime". The concluding argument in that study was a questioning of the usefulness and coherence of the smart shrinkage concept (*ibid*.).

Rightsizing is another concept used mostly by planners and within planning research. It has been defined as "urban policies which deal with decline and try to adapt the built environment to a reduced population size" (Béal *et al*. 2019, 193), as efforts towards "diminishing or right-sizing the excess supply of houses, roads, and other infrastructure to reflect a smaller population" (Hartt 2019, 1653), or simply as "approaches and tools coping with surpluses" (Batunova & Gunko 2018, 1581). Rightsizing, more concretely, includes policy measures such as the demolition of buildings, the development of land banks, zoning ordinances, and long-term comprehensive plans (Béal *et al*. 2019).

Both as a concept and as a practice, rightsizing has been met with critique. This is, Hackworth (2015, 780) suggests, "not a post-growth epiphany" but an "attempt to reset growth by converting the most

expensive parts of the territorial social economy into a new investment opportunity". Rightsizing has also been interpreted as mere austerity policies including "downsizing local governments, fiscal retrenchment, public service cuts, reduction of the social housing stock" (Béal *et al*. 2019, 193). In a study from Cleveland, US Coppola (2019, 237) suggests that right-sizing strategies should be understood as "open, contested, fields of policy experimentation whose transformative potential has to be closely investigated by critical geographers, planners and policymakers". Béal and colleagues (2019, 193) suggests that right-sizing practices seem to have a limited capacity to meet the challenges of shrinkage, and at worst accentuate some the "worst exclusionary tendencies" of contemporary urban planning regimes.

For my part, I have suggested that the concept of local adaptation policy must be understood through its three constituent parts. The first part, local, indicates a focus on local levels of government. The second, adaptation, indicates that someone is indeed adapting to something (in this case, depopulation and its financial and organisational consequences). The third part, policy, importantly, suggests that adaptation is far from a value-neutral or bureaucratic issue but a set of ideas that involves value judgements and priorities (Syssner 2018a, 2020b). In a continuous elaboration on the concept of local adaptation policy, geographers can assist by elucidating how policy and planning systems adapt to a new demographic situation, characterised by declining birth rates, larger shares of immigrants, ageing, and fluctuating part-time inhabitants. Adaptation does not need to be comprised entirely of budget cuts and harsh priorities, but could also be manifested in local governments' attempts to innovatively reorganise their service provision or altered planning practices – for example, in the form of facilitation of second homes (Hidle *et al*. 2010; Overvåg 2011; Arnesen *et al*. 2012).

Regardless of whether we use the concept of adaptation policy, smart shrinkage, or right-sizing, we may continue by asking how shrinkage becomes politicised in the first place in various contexts (Béal *et al*. 2019) – or what effectiveness various policy responses have (Döringer *et al*. 2020). In any case, the issue of policy evaluation is very much a task for the geographer. Thus, as Martin (2001, 190) suggests, human geographers have a long tradition of evaluating policies and to "reveal their limitations, biases and effects". Human geography can contribute with a deeper understanding of the implications that place-specific local contexts may have for policy. Thus, from a geographical perspective, it is evident that context matters, and that planning, and policy measures need to be sensitive to local, place-specific conditions in order to be effective (Martin 2001). To develop a "one-size-fits-all" approach to shrinkage is, as Batunova and Gunko (2018, 1582) point out, a hard task.

We could also continue by asking how shrinkage is dealt with by actors with no formal political mandate. Several studies have observed that civic action tends to be regarded a necessity for managing shrinkage while maintaining quality of life for residents. Several studies have observed patterns of action among village groups and community organisations engaging in informal planning practices (McFarlane & Waibel 2012; Meijer & Syssner 2017; Syssner & Meijer 2017b; Abramsson & Hagberg 2018). Ročak, Hospers and Reverda (2016) point to examples where shrinkage has led variously to increased, sustained, and reduced civic action. Other studies have demonstrated in a similar vein that depopulation can inspire feelings of responsibility and action among residents, but also constitute a hindrance to the capacity for participatory, integrated, and sustainable planning (Pallagst *et al*. 2017). The stigmatisation sometimes associated with shrinkage can lead to opposition or resignation among residents, or fuel existing processes of negotiating identities (Meyer *et al*. 2016). All these processes are highly relevant to study from the perspective of geography.

The focus of the above discussion has been on policy interventions on the local and regional scale. Hagen, Higdem and Overvåg (2022) contribute to this literature by investigating in more detail to what extent demographic change is reflected in contemporary policy and planning in the Norwegian region Innlandet. One argument from them is that the policy and planning response to shrinkage in Norway is best described as either varied, incoherent, or as a hybrid between a variety of approaches. Albrecht and Kortelainen (2022) contribute with an exploration of small-town revitalisation initiatives in six shrinking small towns in Finland. They contribute to the on-going discussion of what capability local level governments have to include shrinkage into planning visions on a local policy level, and for whom local level revitalization programmes are initiated. In their contribution to this volume, Carson and others (2022) show that contemporary patterns of resource distribution in Southern Lapland are largely the result of ad-hoc decision making, rather than formal planning.

So far, I have referred mostly to policy responses observed at the local level of government. But of course, policy responses to shrinkage or to uneven demographic change can be observed at the national and international levels too. One such response is that of administrative reforms or, more precisely, municipal amalgamations. As demonstrated by Erlingsson, Ödalen and Wångmar (2021), a long list of Western European democracies have used municipal amalgamation reforms as a means to enhance the capacity of (allegedly too-small) local governments to provide their citizens with services. In this volume, Kasemets and Nugin (2022) examine one such amalgamation, i.e., the one passed in Estonia in 2017. In line with other municipal amalgamations (see Erlingsson *et al*. 2021), the Estonian reform aimed at strengthening the municipal level by sparing costs for administration and by improving the local quality of governance (Kasemets & Nugin 2022). It is still unclear, as pointed out by Erlingsson, Ödalen and Wångmar (2021) and by Kasemets and Nugin (2022), whether reforms of this kind really have the intended effects. Yet, they do seem to have implications for socio-cultural activities, for community activism, and for formal and informal policy making.

Makkonen, Inkinen and Rautiainen (2022) stress that a vital role of researchers is to inform policymakers on the national level about the challenges that municipalities and regions face due to demographic change. The rhetoric and policy of regional competitiveness from the early 1990s onwards has, as emphasised by them, resulted in an uneven development between the cores and the peripheries (see also Syssner 2006), an unevenness that local, regional, and state governments now have to deal with.

## Alternative perspectives and models

So far, I have pointed to those studies that have observed the neglect of shrinkage in policy and planning, as well as the concepts of adaptation policy, smart shrinkage, and rightsizing. An important task for geographers, however, would also be to identify alternative trajectories and policy developments. Included in this task is the endeavour to understand how citizens organise themselves in relation to globalisation, centralisation, urbanisation, deindustrialisation, and other factors that are understood to foster uneven demographic development. Also included is the study of how citizens meet with the consequences of depopulation and how they engage in acts of both resistance and transition.

Previous studies demonstrate that rural resistance can be mobilised among communities against the closure of schools or hospitals (Taghizadeh 2015; Fuglestad & Almås 2020), but also against central decisions about the setting up of wind turbines (Anshelm & Simon 2016) or global trends of rising petrol prices. Patterns of resistance include demonstrations for local food sovereignty (Ayres & Bosia 2011) as well as populist right-wing movements (Mamonova & Franquesa 2020) and hunting movements seeking to safeguard rural interests against allegedly state-driven nature conservation efforts (von Essen *et al*. 2015). In a discussion of rural resistance, Scoones and colleagues (2018, 1) suggest that a new political moment is in progress, partially manifested in "the rise of distinct forms of authoritarian populism". More precisely, they refer to nationalist concerns, protectionist politics, a discursive positioning of insiders against outsiders, and pleas for security rather than civil liberties.

A related task for geographers may also be to identify and even normatively suggest alternative paths of development for shrinking rural areas. Thus, in the literature, several voices call for policies capable of improving the quality of life or well-being of residents rather than pursuing population growth or "simply augment(ing) the value of land and spur(ring) economic growth" (Schindler 2016, 3; see also Pallagst *et al*. 2009; Hollander 2017; Hartt 2019). Some have argued that the capacity for "capitalising on the positive aspects of shrinkage" is desperately needed (Pallagst *et al*. 2013), and that it is essential to develop policies showing that a place can lose parts of its population and still offer a high quality of life to its residents (Hollander 2011, 2018; Hartt 2019).

When exploring what these alternative, beneficial pathways could be, a distinction can be made between the processes of policy development, and the contents of policy. In a study from Denmark, Tietjen and Jørgensen (2016, 29) suggest that shrinkage constitutes an example of a "wicked planning problem". Strategic planning is thus suggested as a translation process where key actors need to elaborate both shared understandings of problems and strategic visions that transgress multiple scales. Other studies discuss the potential of a design perspective as a means to rethink planning in a

shrinking context (Kempenaar *et al*. 2016; Kim 2019). In the ESPON ESCAPE final report, Copus and others (2020) advocate a four-stage process of policy development in shrinking regions. The process, it is suggested, should acknowledge the crucial role of narratives in shaping local and regional strategies, the importance of clear rationales for policy intervention, a focus on good practices, and evaluation of policies as an integral part of the intervention.

But what could a positive, forward-looking, and inclusive policy goal for shrinking areas look like content-wise? Is the dream of economic and population growth the only dream that can be dreamt there? Below, I refer to three main perspectives that are encountered in both academic and public debates: the shrinking place as a digitalised one, as a sustainable one, or as a place for either elderly and/or temporary residents.

### *The digitalised place*

At times, shrinking rural areas are depicted as potential temporary places of residence for digital nomads, or as more permanent homes for distance-working individuals, utilising a wide range of digitalised public and commercial services. Such a development has been anticipated by many and has been repeatedly pointed to following the COVID-19 pandemic. Hospers and Reverda (2015), however, underlined well before the pandemic that due to information and communication technology, rural areas have become gradually ever more included into larger structures. Thus, even in the smallest and most remote places of Europe, they conclude, residents are informed about events and developments elsewhere. According to Hospers and Reverda (2015), this could be understood as an emancipatory process, and a silent revolution in the European countryside.

Today, society has gone through a digital revolution, while at the same time the structuring conditions of globalisation and urbanisation are being rapidly reinterpreted. The idea of a global, integrated economy was put under pressure when governments closed their borders due to COVID-19. Urbanity has been widely reframed, and distance modes have fundamentally changed the geography of work and education (Reuschke & Felstead 2020; Bergdahl & Nouri 2021). Despite critical remarks about the social and spatial inequalities embedded in distance work and study (Reuschke & Felstead 2020), and about rural citizens being older, less resourceful, and thus more vulnerable than urban ones, the popular debate still frames the post-pandemic state as beneficial for the rural environment (Boterman 2020; Nordregio 2020), and cultivates the idea of shrinking, rural areas as being connected, digital, and innovative. Here, empirical results will be needed before we can determine the substance of these ideas.

### *A sustainable place*

The debate on how to reconstruct society after the coronavirus feeds into a long-standing debate on how to transform society in a more sustainable direction. The economic crisis following from the pandemic has inspired calls for green deals capable of counteracting recession as well as addressing climate change (Lahcen *et al*. 2020). It has also brought radical calls for a "new normal" (Benjamin *et al*. 2020) and for a transition to a sustainable society beyond green growth rhetoric (Rees 2019a; Trainer 2020). An emerging theoretical approach of resilience stresses the need for societies to develop their capacity to "maintain [their] core functions" when hit by sudden changes (Kotilainen *et al*. 2015, 58; see also Döringer *et al*. 2020). On this matter, the concept of degrowth has been increasingly referred to as potentially promising in a shrinking context. This concept asks, as suggested by Latouche (2010, 519), for the abandonment of "the target of growth for the sake of growth [...and...] the religion of the economy, growth, progress and development".

The call for resilience and for sustainable transition is reflected in the ESPON ESCAPE final report, suggesting that visions for shrinking rural regions need to link up to the contemporary debate on the need for just transition and a decarbonised economy (Copus *et al*. 2020). The report also points to the need for a broadening of goals – beyond economic growth – in shrinking rural areas, goals that also address issues such as inclusion, spatial justice, and well-being (*ibid*.).

And indeed, a limited but growing number of local communities are aiming towards a transition of socio-economic systems by promoting alternative development trajectories. Local examples include

re-localisation of food production/consumption (Rees 2019b), the establishment of autonomous eco-villages, lifestyle choices such as down-shifting, off-grid living (Vannini & Taggart 2013) and the Simpler Way perspective (Trainer 2020), but also local eco-entrepreneurship and the creation of social currencies (framed as) sustainable (Balaguer Rasillo 2021).

The idea of a circular economy has become quite well-established over the last few years. The idea has been developed without any relationship to shrinking geographies, but attempts have nonetheless been made to link the two together. A circular economy, briefly, can be understood as an economic system based on a combination of reduce, reuse, and recycle activities which challenges linear "end-of-life" business-models (Kirchherr *et al*. 2017, 224). Whether such a system fundamentally transforms the economy is contested (Bradley & Persson 2022), but its potential for non-growth territories, where planning for growth does not seem to be an adequate strategy, has been discussed. A study from the Baltic States (Livina & Veliverronena 2019) contributes by theoretically exploring "the potential benefits provided by application of principles of circular economy in shrinking regions". These studies do indicate that such principles could be applicable to shrinking regions, even if there are challenges as such as "cooperation, philosophy of consumption and values, willingness and availability to pay for services" (Livina & Veliverronena 2019, 147).

By and large, however, ideas of circular economy and sustainable transition seem to operate largely parallel to mainstream rural development, even if there are individuals and groups pushing the integration of these transitions into local and regional policy-making (Buhr *et al*. 2018). In this volume, Halonen (2022) refers to a qualitative interview study of directors in regional and sub-regional development organisations. By paying attention to how the informants understand or conceptualise features such as growth, green growth, sustainable growth, and degrowth, we can discern whether growth tends to be framed as an impossible, possible, or compelling development path for shrinking areas.

Interestingly, the idea of a green, circular, and sustainable economy is fairly often (and perhaps ironically) interpreted as a window of opportunity for growth for rural peripheries. Lundmark, Carson and Eimermann (2022) stress that governmental agencies in the Swedish Arctic have high hopes that the massive investments made in green energy in the region will turn years of depopulation into massive in-migration from the Swedish south. In other words, green industrialisation is in this context believed to lead to a significant inflow of people and increasing demands for schools and other public services (*ibid*.).

### *The temporary, ageing, or global place*

The idea of shrinking rural areas as digitalised and sustainable can be complemented with certain other, if less dominant, ideas. Some voices have highlighted the idea of shrinking cities and regions as ageing places, where the contribution of older people to the economy and welfare must be emphasised, sometimes described in terms of the "silver economy" (Hospers & Reverda 2015, 44). A land use study from Berlin suggests that the age structure of inhabitants is relevant for planning practices; an ageing of the population, advanced by shrinkage, does affect land consumption and pushes towards reurbanisation but also towards landscape fragmentation (Lauf *et al*. 2016). Other studies discuss the potential of shrinking cities as green retirement cities and suggest active retirement migration and health tourism as parts of revised development strategies in shrinking, ageing areas (Nefs *et al*. 2013).

Some, however, point to the difficult aspects of being a place primarily for older people. In her commentary on my paper, Meijer (2022) refers to arguments made by Steinführer and Grossmann (2021) and reminds us about the hidden dynamics of old-age immigration. While monitoring the consequences of population change in small towns in Germany, they observe that migration balances in those towns were mostly negative, even if the towns – somewhat surprisingly – turned out to be target locations for old-age migration. These trajectories, it is argued, seem to remain "largely out of sight of municipal decision makers" (*ibid*., 176). This is noteworthy, since re-growth induced by an influx of older people may demand strategies other than those rendered when a town grows to birth surplus or due to an influx of young people.

In policy, practice, and research, we come across those who stress the importance of shrinking rural areas as locations for recreation, tourism, and leisure. Part-time residents and second-home owners are in these contexts pointed out as potentially important for local development in shrinking, rural areas (Hidle *et al*. 2010; Overvåg 2011). In other contexts, these areas have been depicted as a meeting place for newly arrived international migrants. From this perspective, the sparsely populated rural municipality has advantages when it comes to introducing and welcoming newly arrived people in our society. In a small municipality, dividing lines between administrative units or between local governments and citizens are less sharp. Civil society in such areas is often well developed and displays a strong sense of community. These qualities make shrinking rural places well suited to meet the complex needs of a newly arrived family (Syssner 2018b).

To summarise, we have an important job to do when it comes to identifying alternative trajectories and policy developments in shrinking areas. Included in this task are efforts to understand how and based on what values citizens organise themselves in relation to the drivers and consequences of shrinkage. Also included is the attempt to identify promising ways forward. On a critical note, Meijer (2022) rightly asks whether attempts to envision futures without growth really have potential. Digitalisation, sustainability, temporality, and ageing all have, as Meijer argues, serious downsides. Will these downsides be outweighed and outplayed by the advantages – or will these pathways (perhaps even worse) remain platitudes and buzzwords without real meaning?

## Nordic perspectives – the comparative approach

The lion's share of the literature referred to here has evolved in contexts outside the Nordic countries. It might be that I have overlooked a huge body of Nordic literature on shrinkage, but I am more inclined to say that we in the region still have job to do and articles to write. It seems like surprisingly little has been written about shrinkage in a Nordic context, despite the fact that depopulation has shaped local societies in the Nordic region for decades.

Several voices stress the fact that research on shrinkage has long remained case study-based (Haase *et al*. 2017; Döringer *et al*. 2020), and also focused mainly on instances of urban shrinkage. Many scholars do identify a need for cross-continental debate and discussion, and for comparative studies capable of exploring governance responses in different national contexts (Döringer *et al*. 2020). In calls for a more comparative approach, however, Nordic countries are seldom mentioned (e.g. Hackworth 2014; Haase *et al*. 2017; Batunova & Gunko 2018). Still, I would suggest that studies from the Nordic region could contribute with two things: experiences of sparsity, and experiences of shrinkage in a welfare state context.

As indicated above, international research tends to focus on urban shrinkage. There are, however, an increasing number of studies that point to the fact that shrinkage is a planning condition in many small and medium-sized towns too (Döringer *et al*. 2020). That said, the limited importance that these locations are given in the larger planning system makes this kind of shrinkage appear as "a silent process" (Béal *et al*. 2019, 196). Studies where the Nordic experience of rural shrinkage is in focus would thus be a worthy contribution to the international literature.

Even more important, perhaps, is the experience of meeting shrinkage within the context of a welfare state. It should be mentioned that the Nordic welfare model is undergoing a fundamental transformation (Kvist & Greve 2011), but for a long period of time, our welfare system has been based on the principle of universalism and on the idea that all citizens should be able to "maintain a livelihood without reliance on the market" (Esping-Andersen 1990, 21–22). Citizens are expected to pay rather high income taxes, and in return, extensive social rights should be offered equally to everyone (Syssner 2020d). Services such as healthcare, schools, and elderly care are, in the words of Esping-Andersen (1990, 21–22), at least in theory "rendered as a matter of right".

These principles of the Nordic welfare model entail that depopulation and the consequences thereof is an issue that the public sector must address (Syssner 2020d). Albrecht and Kortelainen (2022) point out that despite stable economies and high standards of living, the Nordic countries are still very much affected by decline in non-core regions. This constitutes a difference from those states where welfare systems are more reliant on initiatives organised by individuals, families,

insurance companies, or other private actors. This attribute makes the Nordic countries interesting cases in international comparisons.

## Conclusion

The question that has guided this text is what we as geographers can do for shrinking geographies. The answer that has been provided – although incomplete and hopefully to be supplemented or modified by colleagues – is that we can assist by showing how resources have been distributed in space over time and why such patterns take the shape they do. We can also contribute by demonstrating what it means to live, work, and operate in shrinking, rural territories by making implicit geographical imaginations explicit, and by pointing to the ways in which shrinkage is dealt with by various policy actors. We could also make alternative policy directions explicit and, not least, enrich an international research field by providing case studies or comparative studies from a Nordic context.

The question raised and the answers provided indeed assume that we should do something for these areas. This, of course, is an assumption that could be questioned. Our assignment, some may argue, is to produce knowledge without concern about who the beneficiaries of that knowledge might be. My response to such a position would be that no knowledge that geographers produce could be neutral towards place. Whatever we study – be it areas of growth, entrepreneurs, or those hired by them; border areas, border defences, or migrants; tourism areas, tourism entrepreneurs, and tourists; or any other geography or constellation of actors – we contribute to shaping the world and people's perceptions of it. By lending our time and attention to shrinking areas, we increase our common understanding of a set of circumstances that are relevant for a large part of our world.

At the outset, I also asked what relevance the scholarly concern for shrinking geographies could have for others than those facing these issues in their daily lives. Here, I would end by saying that shrinking areas – their conditions, trajectories, and challenges – are manifestly interdependent with their surroundings; with growing, urban areas locally, nationally, and globally. For society to understand and deal with contemporary societal challenges – such as social cohesion, political legitimacy, democratic governance, or global climate change and green transition – we as scholars must be able to provide knowledge of geographies with a variety of conditions. At this point, I cannot stress enough the importance of Kovanen's (2022) call for a global perspective. We need to learn more about the differences and similarities between shrinking areas in the West, and in the Global South, East, and North. Let's make sure the conversation and the exchange around this topic can continue to develop.

## Notes

[1] "Across Europe, almost 60% (687) of Predominantly Rural or Intermediate NUTS 3 regions meet the criteria of sustained (past or projected future) demographic decline." (Copus *et al*. 2020, 6)

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