

## Reflections

# Shrinking geographies or challenged rurality's? Three points of reflection – commentary to Syssner

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By asking 'what could geographers do for shrinking geographies' Josefina Syssner offers a very comprehensive overview of what has been and should be on the research agenda's for understanding rural shrinking geographies. In this commentary I would like to address three issues related to the Fennia keynote, that may add an additional perspective or a moment of reflection: 1) the issue of demographic change, rather than shrinkage, 2) how we can imagine the future of shrinking geographies, and 3) what Nordic perspectives have to offer. In conclusion, I believe that peripheral geographies, and challenged rurality's deserve a key position within geography and related disciplines, and call for a repolitisation of the topic: what we research, how we conceptualise or even advice has consequences for those living and imagining futures in peripheral, rural and depopulating regions.

Keywords: shrinkage, rural geography, Nordic perspectives, future, critical geography

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*Jij woont hier ver vandaan, zeggen ze elders in het land. Dan zeg ik, insgelijks, u ook, a'j 't zien van dizze kant. [You live far away from here, they say. And I say you too, if you see it from my side.]* Lohues (2008)  
– singer-songwriter from Drenthe, the Netherlands

With her keynote and publication in *Fennia*, Josefina Syssner (2022) offers a very comprehensive overview of how the research agenda's for understanding rural shrinking geographies have developed over the past decades. Doing so, she does not only look at shrinkage as a geographical phenomenon, but also offers an inside view from those living and dealing with the changing demographics in rural peripheries. The thoroughness of her work deserves a great compliment and will benefit all shrinking researchers. Besides thorough, Syssner demonstrates that she is not a romantic, and neither should we be: consequences of shrinkage (declining economies, downsizing social infrastructures, failing (growth) policies, health risks and high living costs) are real, and will hurt a large group of people – as

well as others may thrive living under marginal circumstances. While the resilience and self-organisational capacity of those staying in shrinking regions is often addressed as a resource and development potential, the opposite is equally true, as we have addressed in the *Journal of Rural Studies* (Meijer & Syssner 2017). Communities lacking social capital, not being part of the right networks or without any other entrepreneurial capacities might not resist the consequences of decline and will be left behind – temporarily at least (Meijer 2020).

In this commentary I would like to address three issues related to the keynote, that may add an additional perspective or a moment of reflection: 1) the issue of demographic change, rather than shrinkage, 2) how we can imagine the future of shrinking geographies and 3) what Nordic perspectives have to offer.

### **Is it shrinkage?**

First of all, Syssners' contribution explicitly refers to shrinkage, largely defined by declining population numbers. Though the temporal, legacy and active dynamics of shrinkage are addressed, ageing and selective out-migration might have more structural effects for regional development, than declining population numbers by itself. The question 'What could geographers do for post-declining regions?' was already raised and I would like to stretch this debate a little further, especially given the post-pandemic situation – wherein a substantial number of formerly shrinking regions experienced population growth, but not necessarily prosperity (Bock & Haartsen 2021).

In the Netherlands, shrinkage became a dominant topic on national and regional policy agenda between 2005–2015. Shrinkage was recognised as a potential crisis for rural peripheries, with far-reaching consequences for local livability and economic development. The migration crisis of 2015 turned the tide: the population in most rural peripheries stabilised and is now slowly growing again – due to the post-pandemic effects, international migration and a shortage of housing in (by now) all parts of the Netherlands. The question is: have we passed the state of crisis? Policy-makers say yes: those years of problematizing shrinkage did not resolve the problem, and only led to stigmatisation of rural areas. Amongst them there is a tendency towards growth policies (attracting businesses, and labour forces to ensure economic viability and livability for the long term) visible again. Scientists are more reluctant to claim victory and point towards more structural demographic changes, with unsettling effects for rural development (Daly & Kitchin 2013; Bock & Haartsen 2021). Steinführer and Grossmann (2021) warn for the hidden dynamics of old-age immigration in shrinking areas: population growth can go hand in hand with amplified ageing of the population – augmenting the consequences of decline: a population in need of care facilities, and a growing lack of labor force to provide such care. In the Netherlands, and probably other North-Western European countries as well, we mostly witness a large share of older migrants as a cause of rural population growth. Another significant growth group concerns recognised refugees, who are offered residences in rural areas, but tend to resettle to larger towns as soon as they legally can. As such, their contribution to growth is temporarily and challenging for policy-makers. Underlying causes of population change remain unchanged: pupil numbers and the share of young professionals are declining faster than ever before. Syssner (2022) nicely illustrated the persistence of growth-thinking with her own empirical observations from interviewing policy-makers the one-year population numbers actually grew. Bock and Haartsen (2021) argue for keeping rural depopulation on the policy agenda, despite observing population growth, given the undercurrent of destabilizing consequences of ongoing processes of population change. In response to 'what could geographers do for shrinking geographies?', should we not alter our vocabulary? Abandon shrinkage – and address the underlying challenges of population change, peripheralisation and a growing (geographical, economic and social) divide between national and regional institutions?

### **Imagining the future**

Second, as a planner I am concerned with the future, our imaginations of the future and mostly how to achieve such futures through spatial interventions. Syssner (2022) demonstrates that shrinking geographies have pointed us to ways of envisioning futures without growth: through acknowledgement

of structural decline, and policy strategies such as adaptation, smart shrinkage, rightsizing and degrowth as our newest branch on the tree. Scientists and policy-makers regularly claim that rural peripheries might become frontrunners in this respect, being the first to deal with the effects of declining welfare states, neo-liberalisation and small, but dynamic governance networks. But are they? Can we claim successful examples of smart adaptation, rightsised or degrown places, over the long term? So far, my (undoubtedly limited) observation is that shrinking areas can adapt and even flourish, but this is mostly due to factors that are difficult to control: an influx of capable individuals, changing global circumstances or national policies, including structural funding (see also Rutgers 2022). I agree with Syssners call for positive, forward-looking and inclusive policies for shrinking areas. However, all options – digitalisation, sustainability, or a focus on temporality, aging and globalisation – seem to have serious downsides or are heavily nuanced. It leaves me wondering: what kind of imagination do we have to offer to those making future plans? Is degrowth, as Marxist alternative, the answer? Or will rural peripheries soon be marked by other, more extreme challenges, such as climate change, energy crises (including becoming a favorable location for renewable energy) and biodiversity loss?

### **Nordic perspectives**

Third, Syssners (2022) keynote ends with a promise: a unique perspective from Nordic countries. At the same time the paper acknowledges that, despite facing long term shrinkage, the phenomenon has been under-researched and insufficiently acknowledged by policy-makers in Nordic countries. It leaves me wondering what will we learn, when looking into the Scandinavian mirror? Is it just a reflection from another part of the world? Or does the Nordic have a unique perspective to offer on shrinking geographies?

As a start, I have a unique Nordic perspective to offer from my own country. Here we perceive shrinkage as phenomenon of recent, and now faded-out, interest as well. However, thanks to the historical study by Melis (2013), we can reflect on five decades of rural shrinkage in the most Northern province of the Netherlands: Groningen. It teaches us about the long-term dynamics of changing, peripheral and shrinking rural regions in the 20th century. The study builds on a report (Bedreigd Bestaan – Endangered Existence) published to shed light on the consequences of population decline for this specific region in 1959. Ahead of its time, the report and indicated ‘community organisation’ as a future for Northern Groningen. Awareness raising and stimulating self-reliance among the local population were regarded as important pillars for securing local livability, but also became part of the regional identity, over the decades.

But, most importantly, while policy-makers and scientists had claimed problem awareness – and organised all sorts of conferences, thematic groups and discussion tables – those undergoing the everyday consequences of decline felt increasingly distanced from the framed problems and formulated policies. Nobody objects to improved livability, or sustainable economic development. However, with such depoliticised and vague policy objectives, local stakeholders found it difficult to imagine what this would exactly imply for them and turned out to have had diverging interests and imaginations for the future (see Melis 2013). These longitudinal case studies, and the critical analysis of how enduring shrinkage has shaped the geographies of Nordic countries, can help us further understand shrinking geographies and policy responses.

### **Conclusion – let’s repoliticise shrinking geographies!**

To conclude, and in addition to Syssners call for further understanding shrinking geographies – there is indeed much we have not studied yet – I would like to amplify Syssners appeal for a re-politisation of the topic: how we frame the problem as scientists, and whether politicians and policy-makers decide to invest in shrinking regions or whose initiatives to support, is also a political choice. We should be aware of the (negative) externalities of formulated solutions: social exclusion, uneven resource distribution or infrastructural development, the pressure to catch up with global development forces or just living with the noise clean energy produces (Demeterova *et al.* 2020). A focus on rightsizing or smart adaptation, however is also a choice not to invest in peripheral regions, made by

national level governments (Küpper *et al.* 2018). Moreover, a call for self-organisation and local resilience, will also support the interests of the capable, networked and well-positioned individuals – and exclude others (Meijer & Syssner 2017; Salemink *et al.* 2017). A policy focus on topics we all agree on (livability, social cohesion, sustainability), neglects other issues of importance for marginalised groups in rural societies – including international migrants, or those unable to out-migrate (Woods 2018). As scientist I am intrigued by these questions: I hope to expand our research after the failures and revival of governance for decline – with team shrinkage (or whatsoever) on our side. As a person growing up in a peripheral – now shrinking – region (Drenthe), I hope our imaginations will not let us down and provide an honest, yet hopeful and inclusive perspective for the rural of the future.

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